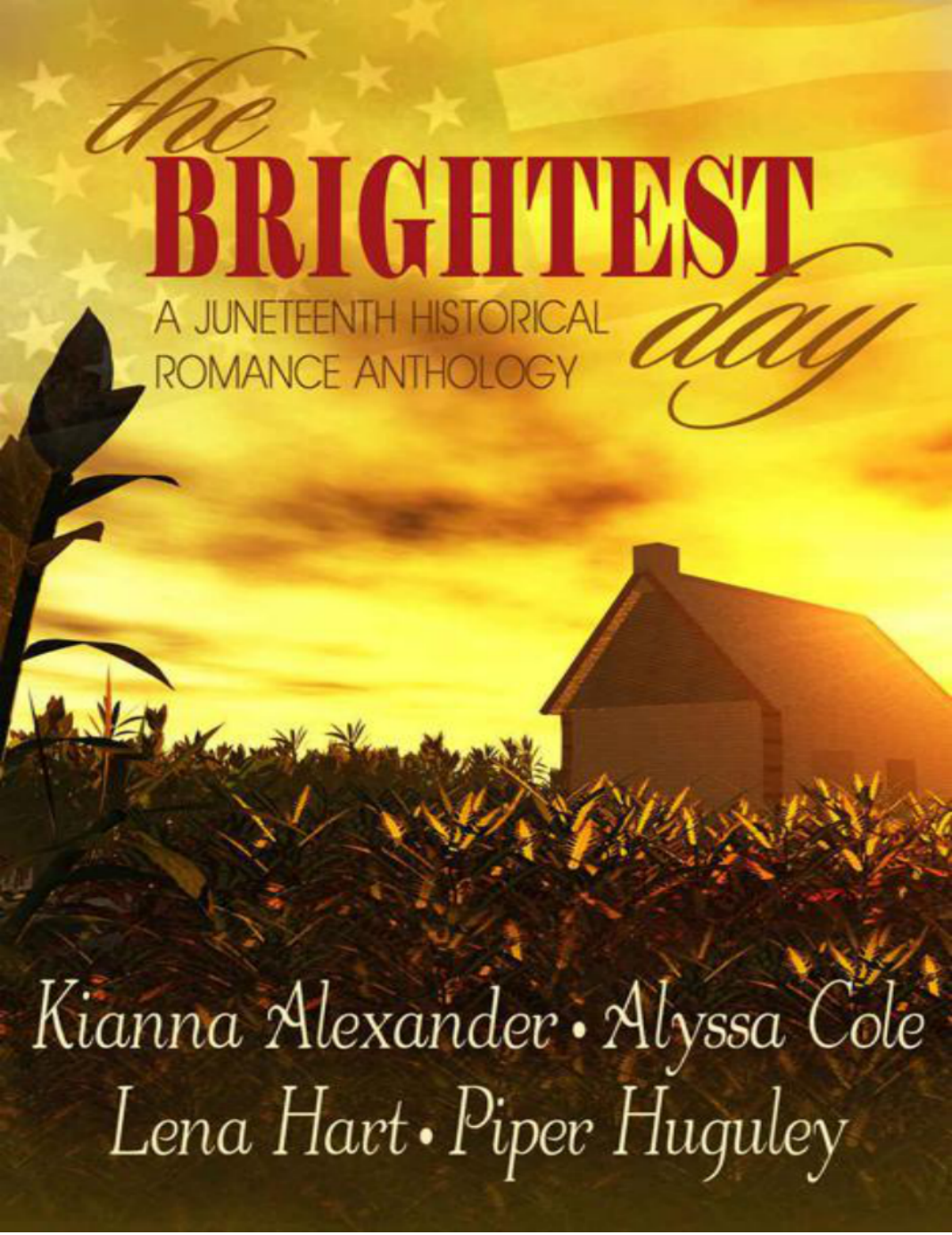

the
BRIGHTEST
day
A JUNETEENTH HISTORICAL
ROMANCE ANTHOLOGY
Kianna Alexander • Alyssa Cole
Lena Hart • Piper Huguley

THE BRIGHTEST DAY:

A Juneteenth Historical Romance Anthology

Stories by:
Kianna Alexander
Alyssa Cole
Lena Hart
Piper Huguley

Foreword by Beverly Jenkins

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Foreword
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Read by General Gordon Granger "19th of June," 1865 Galveston, TX:

General Order #3
"The people (of Texas) are informed that in accordance with a Proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property, between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them, become that between employer and hired labor. The freed are advised to remain at their present homes, and work for wages. They are informed that they will not be allowed to collect at military posts; and that they will not be supported in idleness either there or elsewhere."

When Union Army General Gordon Granger and 2,000 Union soldiers landed at Galveston Island Texas, June 19, 1865 and read General No. 3, slavery was abolished in Texas. Most African-American communities chose January 1 as Freedom/Emancipation Day because President's Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation went into effect January 1, 1863. Others celebrated September 22 because September 22, 1862 was the preliminary day of the Emancipation Proclamation. In parts of Southern Virginia, freedman celebrated April 9th the day Lee surrendered at Appomattox while those in Richmond chose April 3rd, the date the capital of the Confederacy fell to Union troops. But the 250,000 formerly enslaved Texans chose June 19th, or *Juneteenth,* and their descendants still do.

The first organized Juneteenth celebration began in 1866. Because of the state's segregation laws many gatherings were barred from public parks, so in Houston, Austin, and other places, Black Texans pooled their money and purchased land for their purposes. Statewide celebrations continued well into the mid-1880s with baseball games, parades, speeches touting pride and progress, boat rides, music and lots and lots food. In Galveston in 1883, even the prisoners in the city's jail were allowed a day of freedom to join the celebrating.

As the years passed and Texans migrated into other areas, they took Juneteenth with them. It was successful in some areas and found no traction in others, but it soon became part of the debate initiated by those who wanted Black people to choose *one* universal date to celebrate emancipation.

Before the Civil War, August 1st had been such a date. Black abolitionists did not celebrate July 4th. With nearly 3 million people of African descent being held against their will in the slaveholding areas of the south, celebrating America's Independence Day was as ludicrous as it was hypocritical. August 1st was chosen instead. On August 1st, 1834, Britain emancipated its slaves in the West Indies. All over the world from England to Canada to the pre-civil war north, the day was revered. There were picnics, parades, banners, speeches and church night watch services. Many of the gatherings were interracial like one in Harrisburg, Ohio in 1849 which drew a multi-racial crowd of two thousand people. As late as the 1980s, August 1st was still being celebrated in the Midwest and Ontario, Canada.

Why the race needed to be limited to just one day of celebration was the question the Black citizens of El Paso, Texas probably wanted to know after learning the fledgling NAACP was behind a report that advocated doing away with Juneteenth and its decades of traditions in favor of making January 1st as *the* day to honor emancipation.

In the end, it didn't matter. In 1980, Texas was the first state to make Juneteenth a state holiday and unfortunately January 1st has faded from our collective memory. Juneteenth stands as the last of the African-American embraced Freedom Days and that alone makes its continued existence worthy of celebration. Legislation to recognize its significance has been introduced in both houses of Congress. The United States Post Office has been petitioned to issue a stamp in honor of the day and its history. This is its 150th anniversary year. Thanks to the people of Texas, Juneteenth has established itself across America from sea to shining sea. When General Granger read General Order No.3 in Galveston that day, little did he know what he was setting into motion.

Sources:

- *Black Abolitionists* by Benjamin Quarles. Oxford University Press. 1972.
- *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915* by Mitch Kachun. University of Massachusetts Press. 2003.

Amazing Grace

Lena Hart

It's the year 1866—the Civil War is over and slavery has ended…

Yet life for 18-year-old Gracie Shaw takes an unexpected turn when she is "encouraged" to marry a man sight unseen. To ensure the financial stability of her family, she agrees—until a handsome stranger captures her attention and makes going through with the marriage almost impossible.

Determined to start a new life far from his old one, former Confederate soldier Logan Finley boards a train headed West—to lawless territory. When he is entrusted with the duty to escort the loveliest woman he's ever met, he realizes he wants more than just a fresh start. He wants her.

While Gracie wrestles with her desires, she soon learns that there is more to Mr. Logan Finley than she could have ever imagined. Will she find the grace within to forgive their past—or will her anger and pain blind her to true love?

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Dedication

To Ms. Beverly Jenkins—thank you for pioneering this genre and being in the forefront of its success. Here's to its continued growth…

And to taking some of that weight off your shoulders.☺

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.
-Martin Luther King, Jr.

Prologue

September, 1852
Northern Maryland

"You'll be free or die, woman."

Gracie watched as the stern old woman pointed the big, long gun at her mama. Fear paralyzed Gracie where she sat on the high wagon. Tightening her thin arms around her mama's waist, she waited to see what the angry old woman would do.

"Now you sat back down and hold on to your baby girl."

Her mama tightened her arms around her and instantly fell back into her seat. Gracie followed her down, never breaking her hold. The angry old woman slowly lowered her rifle, and the stiffness seemed to leave her mama's slender frame.

"But what if we get caught? Mr. Charlie gon' whip us all good. Then he gon' have Massa sell us down south like he say."

Gracie had never heard such fear, such earnestness, from her mama before. Actually, that wasn't true. She had heard it once before, a few days ago, when her mama had pleaded with Mr. Charlie not to whip her daddy. But the mean overseer hadn't paid her mama's pleas any mind. Her daddy had been beat anyway.

And it had been all her fault.

But tonight, with the air around them filled with fear and panic, all Gracie could do was cling to her terrified mama and keep her arms locked around her waist.

"Your massa prolly kill you and your man if y'all go back. Then he'd sell your little girl. *After* he beat her. Is that what you want?"

Her mama shook her head wildly. "No, no. Massa Flynn ain't like that. Maybe…maybe if we go back, no one will know we missing?"

"Hush, woman, and quit your squealing before you get us all caught. We ain't make it this far just so you can turn back. Now, if your baby girl can be still, so can you."

"Moses, she just scared, is all." The ragged words from her daddy were the first he'd spoken since they'd been riding under the guide of the moonlight. He could barely sit up straight from the lashing he'd gotten from Mr. Charlie, but he managed. "We don't wanna go back."

The woman they called Moses grunted. "Good. Now we got less than an hour before we make it to the next station. This part of the land is gonna be a bit bumpy, so you tell your woman she better not jump up like she did while I'm driving this thing."

"She heard you," her daddy rasped out. "Ain't that right, Lynn?"

Her mama swiftly nodded, and before long, they were again

trampling through the dark road, with the dry autumn leaves and fallen branches crackling beneath the horse hooves and the weight of the wagon.

The night before they'd started on their journey, her mama had told her that they would be leaving for freedom, that they would start a new life, that this old woman was the one who would take them to this "Promised Land." Gracie didn't know what to expect when they got to there, and when she'd asked her mama if they would be happy in this new land, her mama's eyes had filled with tears, but she'd laughed and hugged her close. "Yes, baby, we'll be happy," her mama had said. "A home where we'll be safe and together is a great blessing."

Gracie was anxious now more than ever for them to get to this new land. Her mama was rigid with fear and her daddy was slouched over in pain. Nothing about tonight seemed like a blessing. They had left their warm cabin only to be out here, scared and cold. It wasn't like they had it bad at their old home. Yes, Mr. Charlie was a mean, quick-tempered man, but Massa Flynn never raised a hand to them. He was a big, burly man with a funny accent and was usually smiling —unlike Mr. Charlie. Maybe if Massa Flynn had been on the plantation yesterday, he would have stopped Mr. Charlie from whipping her daddy.

The wagon went over a hump and landed hard, jostling them in their seats. Her father groaned but made no complaint. Gracie wanted to tell her mama that she wanted to turn back too. To get back to their home and into her warm bed. But she didn't dare say a word. The way the old woman managed the horse and buggy said she was determined to get them to their destination. Besides, if her daddy could endear without complaint, she would too.

"Y'all see that light?" Moses finally said, breaking the silence in the wagon. "That light means we're close to reaching friends."

Gracie pulled away from her mother and peered out into the darkness toward the direction the old woman was pointing. In the distance, she saw a soft glow of light. It wasn't the brightest beacon of hope, but that small glimmer filled Gracie with a large amount of anticipation and faith. Their new life was near, and soon they would never have to be scared or cold again.

The wagon went over another ditch. This time, they all bounded slightly from their seat. Without her mama as an anchor, Gracie slid from the wooden bench. She released a small screech as she nearly went flying over the wagon, flailing for something to grab. A strong hand latched on to her arm and hauled her back in.

"Don't worry, little darling. I ain't never lost a passenger and I ain't gonna tonight!" Moses released a quick chuckle before she eased

her tight hold.

Gracie peered up at the old woman as her mama gathered her in her arms. Once her heart slowed its wild beating, Gracie settled against her mama's side and, with a soft smile, silently joined in on the old woman's humming.

The brightest daaayyy that I can saaayyy… Coming for to carry me hooommme…

Chapter 1

June 1866
Outside New York City

"She's a beauty, for sure, Mr. Finley. How much do you want for her?"

Logan Finley spat on the ground, taking his time before he answered. The right response was crucial in that moment if he wanted a good price for his brown beauty.

"Two hundred."

The old shopkeeper whistled. "That's pretty steep, don't you think?"

"You said yourself she's a beauty. Strong teeth. Fine bones, too. I won't take anything less for her."

The man made a show to think over the price, but Logan knew it was just a buyer's ploy to get him to squirm over the potential loss of a sale. But two hundred dollars for his brown chestnut was, in his opinion, already a bargain. He hated to part with the horse, but he couldn't make the trip west with her. He'd just have to hope he could find a suitable replacement with the money from this sale.

"Do you want her or not, Mr. Morgan? I have other offers lined up for her." Logan didn't, but the other man wasn't the only one who had a few tradesmen tricks. Besides, the older man owned several local businesses in the town. He could afford it.

"Okay, Mr. Finley. You've got yourself a deal."

The older man stuck out his hand, and Logan grasped it in a firm handshake. He noticed the way the man's eyes widened as he looked down at his disfigured hand. He was prepared for the man to awkwardly pull away, as so many had done while they attempted not to stare at him with pity. The old shop keeper did release his hand, but he didn't avoid asking him about it, as Logan expected.

"What happened there?"

Logan glanced down at his mutilated right hand where his last three digits had been severed. It was now covered in scar tissue and rough, leathery skin. He usually wore his gloves in public, but with the intense summer heat rolling in, the thick black glove had been uncomfortable. But not as uncomfortable as the sympathetic look the old man was sending him. Suddenly, he was eager to get this last sale over with.

"The war happened," Logan finally replied, annoyed and embarrassed by the pity he saw on the man's face. His hand was a small price to pay given the brutality of the war. Unlike his friends

and his father, he was still alive, and that was all that mattered.

Mr. Morgan made a sympathetic sound and shook his head. “You’re a brave man, Mr. Finley. What a tragedy that our country had to endure such a senseless war by those damn Johnny Rebs. But we sure showed them what for!”

Logan grunted as the man slapped his back, but said nothing. It probably wouldn’t go over well with the old Yank had he known he was conducting business with a “damn Jonny Reb” and Logan wasn’t going to enlighten him. The modest savings he’d been left behind, along with the money he’d made from the assets he’d sold, had afforded him minor luxuries, like new clothes, easy meals, and temporary lodging—luxuries many of his counterparts hadn’t been privileged to enjoy. After the Confederate army had disbanded, thousands of his brother-at-arms had been left in the poorhouse, forced to work menial jobs, or enter into a life of crime, just to get by.

But Logan didn’t spend a lot of time pondering or worrying about what had become of his old regiment. The war was over, and everything—and everyone—he’d known was dead, including his allegiance to the Confederacy. And all the things he had once believed in. There was nothing more for him to do but to move forward—more precisely, move *westward*. There, he would be able to start over and build a new life.

Eager to get going, Logan finalized the sale with the old shopkeeper and headed to the ticket station. Tomorrow morning he planned to be on the first train out of this town. He would make it to Colorado, find him a nice plot of homesteader land to settle on, and finally build a home to call his own.

With his train ticket in his breast pocket, Logan made his way back to the small lodging he’d been renting a room in these past few days, while he finalized last-minute business. As he approached the Negro-owned establishment, the irony wasn’t lost on him that he now depended on shelter from a race of people he had once been the provider for. In fact, most of the businesses in the area were owned by blacks, as were many of the local residents. But they didn’t bother him and he didn’t bother them.

He watched as women and their children roamed the streets, some moving in hurried steps as they tugged their young ones along, others taking leisurely strolls or stopping to socialize. Not unlike how things had been on his farm, but now these people could go and come as they pleased. Hell, if some of the radical Confederates he encountered in the war could see them now, they would realize how wrong their views were—it was apparent the Negro could live and thrive on their own.

Logan couldn’t say he was nostalgic for his old life on his father’s

small farm. He'd been sixteen when his father had fetched him from Mexico to live and work on his small tobacco farm. Surprisingly, his relationship with his father had been better than one would expect from a man who had only just reunited with his illegitimate son. But having spent the majority of his youth working in order to ease the burden from his overloaded mother, Logan had not been a stranger to hard work. But over time, he had grown accustomed to his position on the farm, and managing servants and slaves had come easy. Before the war, the farm had been his life and Logan had never imagined how much he—and everything he believed in—would change because of it.

Now he was undergoing yet another change in his life, and it involved letting go everything he had been taught during his time with his father.

Logan crossed the courtyard and passed a crowd of men, women, and children gathered in a semicircle. There was a small stage being erected with crates and planks of wood. More people began to gather, and a young woman with a yellow and white day dress was helped up on the stage. Her dark brown skin glowed beautifully against the high afternoon sun, and her bright dress was tapered close to her waist, outlining her figure nicely while still remaining modest. He vaguely wondered just how shapely she was under the prim and proper garb.

His interest and curiosity got the better of him, and he moved to take a better look. Before he could get closer, however, something solid bounced from his boot. He glanced down to find an apple resting beside his foot. The young boy, who couldn't have been more than six years old, stood frozen in front of him, gripping a folded paper in his hand. Logan tried to offer him a friendly smile, but the boy continued staring at him with more wariness than should have been on his young face. The look in his stricken gaze was as if he was staring at the devil himself.

With a small sigh, Logan lifted the fallen fruit, which now had a small bruise on the bottom, and held it out to the young boy. "It'd be a shame to let a fine apple go to waste." Logan shrugged. "But if you don't want it…." He waited as the boy took ginger steps toward him to retrieve it. There weren't many whites in this area of town, and Logan couldn't blame the boy for his hesitance. Tales of the violent New York draft riots had made their way down South, and many Confederates had been filled with pride over the news that many Negros had been targeted. Not even the burning of an orphan asylum housing colored children had stopped their celebrating. "Finally the damn Yanks realize who side they should be fighting for," one commanding officer had boasted.

The boy snatched the apple from Logan's hand and took off running. Logan sighed. He couldn't blame the boy for his fear of him.

With the things he'd seen, the things he'd done, it would put the fear of God in anyone.

He turned back to the crowd, and a dark man dressed in religious garb got on the makeshift stage and began to address the crowd.

"Good afternoon, brothers and sisters. Thank you for joining us for our official celebration of freedom. Three years ago, our president, Mr. Abraham Lincoln, God rest his soul, signed the Emancipation Proclamation into law. But it wasn't until last June, in Galveston, Texas, that *all* slaves were finally set free."

The crowd cheered as the reverend went on to highlight points from the proclamation. Logan watched the jubilant crowd, again noting how much things had changed from what he once understood to be his way of life.

"Now as many of you know," the reverend continued, bringing forth the young woman in the yellow dress, "Ms. Gracie and Ms. Madeline will be leaving us tomorrow, so tonight is also a celebration of not only our independence, but also of them and all they've contributed to the community. As we bid them farewell, let's remember to keep them in our hearts and prayers for their long journey."

The crowd murmured and nodded their praise, and Logan stared up at the young woman who appeared bashful yet charmed by the attention. The way she gripped her hands in front of her also revealed how nervous she really was. And the strain of her smile was another indication. Her thick black hair was twisted into two large coils and held together by a snood at the back of her head, revealing a smooth, round face and large, dark eyes. From where he stood, he could see she was a very attractive woman, with a look of innocence that could easily replace all the ugliness he'd ever seen.

Logan shook his head at himself, scoffing at his romanticism. Nothing could make him forget the ugliness he'd witnessed—or the pain he'd inflicted. Not time or alcohol, and certainly not a pretty, wide-eyed young girl. Yet he couldn't quite stop staring at her and he didn't know why. She was only a woman—a Negro one at that—and it was foolish for him to let himself be captivated by an ordinary girl.

And yet there he stood, completely enthralled.

"…before we pray, Ms. Gracie will graciously lead us into song one last time."

The crowd suddenly grew quiet. Not even the wind dared to rustle a leaf. Logan started back toward his lodging, but he didn't get far.

Her voice.

Like a rolling thunder, her voice moved through him with sweet vibrations. It was strong yet ethereal—the kind that myths were made

of. The kind that could soothe and nurture any haunted soul. It enchanted and possessed him.

And kept him frozen where he stood.

"'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear…and grace my fears relieved," she sang. "How precious did that grace appear…the hour I first believed…"

The hairs on the back of his neck stirred, and Logan couldn't tear his eyes away. A singing angel, that's what she was. She kept her eyes shut as she sang, and the serenity on her calm face enchanted him. There was a sort of peace there that he hadn't felt in a long time. And her voice…it was like light illuminating a dark room, like drink to a thirsty man, and Logan didn't realize until that moment how much he craved that lightness again.

Like everyone else in the courtyard, Logan was pulled into her musical spell as she sang the next verse of a song he'd grown all too familiar with on the ravaged battlefields of broken and desperate men.

"Amazing grace… How sweet the sound… that saved a wretch like me… I once was lost... but now am found… Was blind, but now I see…"

The last words glided from her lips in a hypnotic croon until it was nothing but an echo around them. Logan released the breath he hadn't realized he'd held, but no one applauded or even moved because to do so would have somehow disrupted the magic that still lingered in the air.

Chapter 2

Gracie Shaw's heart thumped in her chest as she began to slowly relax. It was always like this when she sang. Her muscles locked in a spell she couldn't pull herself from, as if something or someone had taken over her body and she had no choice but to give into it.

She took a tentative step back as Reverend Mavis came forward.

"That was beautiful, Ms. Gracie. Now let us bow our heads and pray…"

Gracie hesitated, however. She couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching her. She felt its warmth from where she stood, and looked out into the crowd of bent heads as the reverend began his prayer.

The man wasn't hard to miss.

Out in the sea of dark faces was a single white one. Not as pale as some white men she had encountered, but whoever he was, he was certainly a stranger. Even under the brim of his hat, she could feel his intense scrutiny and it brought heat rushing to her cheeks. It was probably all in her head, but she couldn't shake the unnerving sensation that he wanted something from her…something wholly intangible and beyond her reach.

They stood there staring at each other a moment longer, as if they were the only two present in the courtyard. The facial hair covering the lower half of his face hid his expression, which only added to his mystery. He was dressed simply, though the short-tapered ends of his hair said he wasn't so destitute he couldn't afford a regular haircut. His broad shoulders and the thick arms folded over his chest also said he wasn't a stranger to hard work.

But who was he?

He was certainly an enigma, but there was something about him that pulled her attention to him and kept her gaze locked there. She was focused on only him, and he stood there as if he was prepared to wait forever for her to come to him…

Gracie blinked then swiftly bowed her head. She was truly losing her mind if she thought that. The fact that she had managed to come up with such a wild conclusion from just one look was a testament to her overactive imagination, as her parents liked to put it.

She blamed it on her sudden arranged marriage and the long travel she had ahead of her tomorrow. It was making her see things that weren't there—and fantasize things that could never be. She must truly be desperate to get out of her marriage contract if she believed some strange white man was out there to whisk her away from a life she didn't want.

What would it be like to be a miner's wife?

Would it be demanding and tiresome or would she spend most of her days alone at home until he came home? From what she gathered from Mr. Robert Whitaker, he was the owner of several mining companies. Was he the type to sit behind a desk and have other men work for him or was he the type to labor alongside his men?

Gracie took a deep, shuddering breath to quell her sudden anxiety. No need to ponder on that now. She would know soon enough…

A chorus of "amens" rang out, and she became acutely aware that she had not listened to one word of Reverend Mavis' prayer. She blamed that on the stranger, and made a promise to pray double tonight before bed.

Music and laughter broke out among the crowd as their small community began to celebrate their first year of Negro freedom. Different communities had begun celebrating it as early as January, when the proclamation had been signed into law, but their community had thought it more fitting to celebrate this month when the slaves in Galveston had finally been emancipated. Gracie was simply excited that they had such a holiday to celebrate, and was grateful she got to be a part of it in some small way before she left for good tomorrow.

She made her way off the stage, but not before her gaze unconsciously traveled over to where the stranger had stood. He was gone.

It was just as well. She didn't have time to wonder about some strange man and his impolite staring. In less than eighteen hours, she would be on a train to Montana to meet her new husband. And she would never see her family again.

The thought filled her with such sadness that her steps faltered and the tears she had managed to hold at bay for weeks suddenly welled in her eyes. From the land maps she'd studied, Montana was a long way from New York, and she knew that after tonight, she would never have the choice of seeing her parents whenever she wanted, that she would not get to see her ten-year-old brother grow up to be a man.

Gracie quickly dashed the tears away and took an unsteady breath as she hurried home. As much as she wanted to stay for the festivities, she wanted to use the last hours she had left tonight to be with her family. She waved and smiled to those who called out greetings to her, but their faces were a blur from the tears that still clouded her vision. This community had been her home for the last eleven years. Everyone knew her from the work she did at the church and the new orphanage they had built for the displaced children who had come in from the city when the Colored Orphan Asylum had been

burned down.

Another wave of sadness washed over her when she thought of her students. She didn't have any formal training to teach anyone, but with the growing need for educators in their area, she had jumped at the chance to help the younger children with their writing and reading—her two favorite subjects when she had been in school.

She was so caught up in her sorrow that she almost missed little Tobias as he ran toward her and wrapped his small arms tightly around her.

"Oh!" Gracie exclaimed as the little boy buried his face in her skirts. She hugged him close to her for a moment then pulled him away and dropped down to her haunches. Sad brown eyes stared back at her, and she pulled him again to her for another quick hug.

"I'm going to miss you too, Tobias," she whispered over the lump forming in her throat. "But you promise to be a good boy and listen to everything Ms. Monroe tells you?"

The little boy nodded, still clinging to her for a bit longer. She was going to miss him most of all. He had made such significant progress since he'd been under the care of the orphanage. He didn't speak much since he'd been found hiding in the woods a year and a half ago. From the scars on his young body, and the bit of information they had managed to gather from him, he was most likely a runaway who had either been separated from his family or worse—they had been captured or killed.

It had taken months for him to say just a few words, but by then the church had christened him Tobias and the name had stayed. She knew her bond to the little boy came from remembering her own experience many years ago when her family had fled with her in the dead of night. She remembered their fear and her anxiety, and could only imagine what trauma Tobias harbored behind those solemn brown eyes.

"I have to get going now, Tobias." The little boy tightened his hold on her, and she laughed softly. "I wish I could stay," she said. *I wish I could stay forever.* "But I have to go home and finish my packing." She pulled away and wiped the streak of tears that had fallen on his cheeks with the pad of her thumb. "Don't cry. You have plenty of people who love you here. You won't even notice I'm gone."

Her attempt at comforting didn't seem to stop his silent tears. She would just have to maintain her composure and be strong for them both, as she had done the moment she had accepted the arranged marriage.

She had barely managed to keep her poise last week when her students had surprised her with letters and drawings to take with her on her trip. She had said her goodbyes to them, her neighbors, and all

of her close friends these past few days, and yet she still didn't get that sense of closure or peace she had hoped would lighten her heavy heart.

When Tobias' tears stopped, he thrust a crumpled letter and bruised apple toward her. She smiled down at him. He had been the only one who hadn't given her a letter. Not that she had expected one. He was still learning but struggling with his writing.

"Is that for me, Tobias?"

His small head bobbed up and down. Gracie took the apple and note from his hand. He must have picked up the gesture from the other students who liked bringing her and the other tutors apples. Though she detested the fruit, she had never told her students that.

She opened the letter and found a crude drawing of a short figure and a tall one with what she imagined were her wide skirts. Tears again welled in her eyes and she clutched the items to her chest. If she wasn't careful, she would find herself weeping uncontrollably in front of the young boy.

"Thank you, Tobias." Luckily he didn't hear the strain in her voice. "Tell you what. Why don't you walk me the rest of the way home?"

With his small hand tucked in hers, they made the short walk to her family's modest home. When they reached the steps of her front porch, she braced herself for another tearful goodbye, but her young brother startled them when he burst from the house, carrying a cloth-covered basket. In his haste, he almost ran into them.

"*Junior.* Slow down."

Her brother came to quick halt, the basket swaying wildly in his hand. "Gracie? You're supposed to be at the festival."

"I left early. Now, where you off to?"

A wide grin broke out on his dark brown face. "Going to sell Mama's biscuits over there. One penny each."

She stared at him suspiciously. The last she heard, her mother had planned to donate her famous sweet biscuits as part of the festivities. "Did she tell you to sell them?"

"She didn't tell me *not* to."

Gracie shook her head. Telling her ten-year old brother *not* to do something never made a difference. He still took it upon himself to do the complete opposite. She would just have to make sure her mother got a cut of the profits. "Well, make sure you're back for supper. This will be our last meal together, you know."

At the reminder, his face fell and his slender shoulders slumped forward. "I know," he mumbled.

Gracie hooked her finger under his chin and lifted his face to hers. "Hey now. No one's going to buy biscuits from such a sour-

looking face. Now, give me that famous Joseph Junior smile."

The moment he did, she rained down kisses on his face. Her brother squirmed out of her grasp, his round face scrunched with disgust.

"Ugh. Stop, Gracie."

Laughing, she rubbed the top of his coarse hair. "Go on, now. And take Tobias with you." With one last hug from the little boy, she watched as the two boys dashed off down the dirt road. Gracie released a shaky sigh and made her way inside her home, trying hard not to think about it being the last time she would be able to call it that. Home.

Starting tomorrow, she would make the near two-week journey to Montana and begin her new life as Mrs. Robert Whitaker. She didn't know much about the mulatto man other than he was a mature businessman—only a few years her father's junior—that had made his fortune during the Montana gold rush five years ago. He was also a Christian man who had reached out to the church in search of a "pure, good-hearted Christian girl" to move out west and marry. This wasn't the way Gracie had dreamed of meeting her future husband, but that didn't much matter now. Making sure her family was taken cared of did.

The only positive to this all was that she wouldn't be traveling alone. Mrs. Virginia Dobson would be escorting her and Madeline Asher to their new homes—and husbands. Gracie was grateful to have the former abolitionist and widower as an escort. Mrs. Dobson had embarked on similar trips with young white ladies from the neighboring community who had become contract brides for Christian men out west, and for Gracie and Madeline, Mrs. Dobson had volunteered to see them to their destination safely.

Gracie had read many stories of the dangers that were common in the rough terrain, but with Mrs. Dobson's shrewdness and assertiveness, Gracie's fears and anxiety were eased. And though Gracie hadn't developed a close friendship with the other girl who had recently relocated to their community from Pennsylvania, it was nice to know she would have a familiar face with her when they arrived in Montana.

"Gracie, is that you?"

She followed her father's baritone voice to the back bedroom, where her mother was rubbing his injured arm and shoulder. She stood by the door, surprised her father would allow her to see him like this. Since the war, where he had lost his right arm, he only allowed her mother to assist him and see him without his shirt.

"Yes, Daddy?"

"Go in that dresser and get me a clean shirt."

“Joseph,” her mother interjected, “I’ve got you a clean shirt right here.”

“I don’t wanna wear that one. I want Gracie to get me another.”

Her mother didn’t argue further as Gracie went to the dresser and pulled out a shirt that looked similar to the one draped across the foot of the bed.

“Lynn, will you get my medicine?”

Her mother glanced down at her father curiously, her hands hovering over his maimed flesh. “Don’t you want me to help—”

“Gracie can manage. Ain’t that right, baby girl?”

Gracie nodded, equally surprised by the request, however. Her father had never asked for her help before even though his injured arm was a regular source of pain for him. The doctors said it was all in his head, nothing more than “phantom” pain, but whenever it struck, her father would be gripped with agony because of it. Her mother was also taken aback by his unexpected request, but she simply nodded and left the room.

“You’re not scared, are you, baby girl?”

“Of course not, Daddy,” Gracie said, crossing the room to where he sat on the bed.

“It’s okay to be a little scared, y’know.”

She stared at her father for a moment as the real meaning of his words began to sink in. He wasn’t asking if she was scared of him or his injured arm—he wanted to know what she felt about tomorrow and the future. This was the first time her father had asked her about it. When Mrs. Dobson had approached them about the potential arranged marriage, her father hadn’t said much about it, but given her family’s current financial situation, she knew it was an offer she couldn’t readily refuse. And as much as her parents had done and sacrificed for her, she knew it was her turn to give them something in return.

But now, she didn’t know how to respond to her father. Did she tell him the truth or leave him with some reassurance?

“I might be just a little scared, Daddy,” she confessed. “But I’m also excited. I’ll get to see more of the country and will have more stories to write to you and Mama about.” *And I’ll know that you and Mama won’t have to worry about money for a long time.*

Her father chuckled. “You do tell some great stories.”

“So do you,” Gracie teased. After the war, even with all his suffering, her father had told her about the many fascinating places he’d seen and the many different people he’d met along his travels. Though it had been an unfortunate cannon blast that had taken his arm, the pride in his voice from having served his country and fought for their freedom had been quite apparent.

They both fell silent as she helped him into his shirt, careful not to jar his injured flesh. As she tugged the shirt down over his head and torso, it was hard to ignore the faded welts that marred his broad back. Even after all these years, she couldn't forget—or forgive—her selfishness that had led to his whipping. She had brought him so much pain, and he continued to endure more. Agreeing to an arranged marriage was the least Gracie could do to ensure he wouldn't have to worry about finding work.

She stepped back as her father rose from the bed and began tucking the ends of the shirt into his pants. He was lean and tall and, despite his missing arm, still possessed a commanding presence. He always kept his face shaved, and even now his handsome, weary features were free of facial hair.

"Is there anything else you need, Daddy?"

For a moment, he stood there awkwardly staring at her. Then, to her surprise, he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her into a tight hug. Without hesitation, Gracie folded her arms around him and returned the fierce embrace. Though she knew her father loved her, he wasn't always so openly affectionate. She took full advantage of that moment and hugged him tighter.

"I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears." The heaviness of her father's low words pierced through her despair and Gracie realized it was he who was afraid for her. "I love you, Gracelynn Melody Shaw. And I'm gon' miss you."

Those words were her undoing and for the first time in weeks, Gracie let the tears flow as she buried her face into her father's shirt, letting herself get lost in her misery, even for just a little while.

Her father rested his chin on the top of her head, slowly rubbing her back. "Shh, hush now. You have nothing to cry about. You gon' see the rest of the country, remember? And you gon' have lots of stories to send back to us. Ain't that right?"

Gracie nodded. The words she wanted to speak were lodged in her throat, and all she could do was cling to him.

"You just make sure that husband of yours treats you right, Gracie. 'Cause if he don't," he said gruffly, "all you have to do is write to me, and no matter what it takes, I'll be there to come getcha. No matter what."

Chapter 3

"All aboard."

"Come on, girls," Mrs. Dobson called over her shoulder. "We don't want to miss this train."

Gracie followed after the older woman, with Madeline close at her heel. They had just gotten their many bags checked in to the baggage carrier and were now rushing to the passenger car.

This was Gracie's first time travelling on a major railroad, and everything was so confusing. Gracie gave another silent prayer of thanks for having Mrs. Dobson on the trip with them. She would have never managed to figure her way through the mad hustle of the busy train station. And Madeline had been just as confused as she'd been. She imagined the reality of their final departure must be overwhelming for the other girl, because for her it certainly was. But Gracie was good at internalizing her stress and anxiety, and she used that skill to keep her legs moving.

The whistle sounded, signaling the train's imminent departure, just as they reached the steps of the car.

"Come now, ladies," Mrs. Dobson said sharply, wisps of her graying brown hair working their way out of her bonnet as she rushed down the train platform. "Your awaiting grooms provided handsomely to marry two lovely Christian girls and we can't disappoint them."

Gracie wasn't used to hearing the word "groom," and for a moment, she almost turned on her new boots and hurried in the opposite direction. But that was the impulse of the silly, immature girl still in her. She was a soon-to-be-married woman now and needed to behave like one.

With the assistance of a young porter, they climbed onto the passenger car and came face to face with a stern looking conductor.

"Hold it right there," he said tersely, staring at her and Madeline. Though Madeline was a few shades lighter than her, it didn't stop the man from regarding them with equal loathing. "You Negresses need to go to the last car with your kind."

Gracie shouldn't have been surprised, and yet she was. She was also very upset.

"These girls are with me, sir," Mrs. Dobson said briskly, waving him aside. "Please move out of our way so we can take our seats."

"Look, lady, I don't want any trouble," the burly conductor said, anger flushed brightly on his round cheeks. "Now you either take them to the next car or—"

"Or what?" Mrs. Dobson challenged. "You will physically assault a woman of the church and two innocent Christian girls? I didn't think

so, because the fire I would rain down at your feet would not be pleasant. Now, sir, *kindly* move out of our way."

The man glared at them, frustration plain on his ruddy face. "Take them to the back," he snapped then turned and marched down to the next car.

Gracie followed Mrs. Dobson to their seats, passing white passengers who openly gawked at them. She tried her best to maintain a serene expression, but found it difficult to do under the intense scrutiny of the crowded car. The incident was humiliating enough without their speculation, but there was one passenger who wasn't eyeing her like some show attraction. If anything, he looked to be fast asleep, his hat pulled over his face and his legs propped up on the seat across him.

Gracie could understand why Mrs. Dobson chose to sit with this stranger—it was the only section in the train car that could seat the three of them together and was still far enough in the back to keep the hostile conductor content.

"Excuse us, sir." When the man didn't acknowledge them, Mrs. Dobson cleared her throat and not so subtly nudged his leg with her knee.

The man finally pulled back his hat, and Gracie drew in a sharp breath. At the small sound, the man swung his gaze to her, and the breath she forgot to release remained lodged in her throat. She recognized the cool, penetrating gaze from yesterday. It was the same man who had been watching her from the courtyard, whose gaze she had felt before she had even seen him. His beard-covered jaw was much sharper and prominent than she anticipated.

But it was his eyes that drew her. Standing only inches away from him, she could finally make out their color.

Firewood.

That's what they reminded her of. They were the color of fresh firewood—a dark, tawny brown that held the same kind of heat. Even now, as he moved his gaze over her like a warm caress.

"Do you mind, sir?" At Mrs. Dobson's pointed question, the man slowly removed his legs from the seat across from him. "Thank you," she murmured stiffly.

The man inclined his head, but never took his eyes off Gracie. Her cheeks warmed at his assessment, and she averted her eyes as she followed Mrs. Dobson into the narrow space. To her dismay, the older woman took the seat at the window, across the man, forcing Gracie to sit beside him as Madeline came up behind her and took the seat across from him.

Gracie tried not to make a big deal over the seating arrangement, though she tried to create as much distance as she could in the close

space. The wide skirt of her new dress, however, still brushed against his long legs. Her betrothed had been generous with his money, providing an advance to her family, a donation to the church, and additional funds for her to purchase whatever supplies she would need. Mrs. Dobson had made sure the majority of that money went to new dresses and boots. Whatever had been left over, Gracie used to fill one of her trunks with books.

"Are you comfortable, Ms. Gracie?"

Gracie whipped her head around and stared at the stranger. She could only imagine the stunned expression on her face. *How…?* Then she realized he must have been standing among the crowd the entire time she'd been on that stage with Reverend Mavis.

"Yes," she finally managed. "Thank you." There was a hint of awareness in the man's gaze that again held her captivated.

Mrs. Dobson deliberately cleared her throat and the corner of the man's lips quirked into a slight smile. Something in Gracie's belly fluttered.

"Have you two met?"

At Mrs. Dobson's abrupt question, Gracie tore her gaze from the man's and brought it to the older woman's suspicious glare. Her face was paler than usual, most likely from their dash to board the train, but her eyes were clear and sharp.

"Yes, ma'am," the man said. "I had the pleasure of hearing Ms. Gracie sing yesterday."

"During the celebration," Gracie added, feeling the need to explain her unusual acquaintance with this stranger. She didn't even know his name and yet felt as if they had just been caught in a secret.

Mrs. Dobson sized him up, her lips pursed and her moss-green eyes watchful. "Well, since you were gracious enough to allow us to sit with you, it's only proper that we formally introduce ourselves, Mister…"

"Logan Finley, ma'am." He held out his hand. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Gracie was taken aback by his politeness. There was something about him that made his civility not insincere just…unexpected.

She also picked up on his slight accent. Usually she was good at placing someone's background based on their dialect, but she couldn't pinpoint his. Though there was something familiar in the slow lilt of his words, she still couldn't quite identify it.

Mrs. Dobson took his hand and proceeded to formally introduce them. Madeline nodded to the man, yet remained quiet for the most part. While they weren't close, Gracie knew the girl was still grieving the loss of her former fiancé.

Gracie was also surprised by the gloved hand the man extended

to her. Although there was a bite in the morning air despite the warm weather, the train car was comfortable enough that there was no need for gloves and she found his use of them odd. But as not to appear impolite, she slowly slipped her hand into his. There was strength in his grip, as well as a surprising gentleness.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Finley."

"Pleasure's all mine." The heated glint never left his copper-brown eyes. He held her hand in his for a moment longer, and she couldn't ignore the soft tremors that coursed along her hand against the rough feel of his leather glove.

What she was feeling toward this stranger was unusual and inappropriate. She had only just met the man—a strange white man who was probably capable of anything, despite his good manners and obvious proper upbringing. She didn't like to judge a person until they gave her something to judge them for, but there was something about his eyes that made her think there was a more impassioned man lying dormant inside him.

She tugged her hand from his grip and he released her. Clasping her hands on her lap, Gracie turned to stare out of the window. The gray fog and weather-worn buildings began to roll by as the train slowly pulled out of the station.

This was it.

She was leaving her home—her family—for good.

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"Where are you traveling to, Mr. Finley?"

Logan focused his attention on Mrs. Dobson's question, and away from the silent woman sitting beside him. She was prettier than he initially realized. Where he'd stood yesterday, he hadn't been able to see just how large and captivating her curious, mahogany eyes were. She even smelled nice, like the vanilla spice his mother would harvest in Mexico when he was a boy.

"I'm on my way to Colorado, ma'am," Logan replied. "For work."

Mrs. Dobson nodded approvingly. "Like so many young men of our city. Working is good, but don't forget God and the church." She pulled out a fan from her sleeve and began fanning herself rapidly. "'And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men.' Colossians three twenty-three."

Logan nodded politely. Though it had been a while since he'd read the bible—or been in the presence of young Christian ladies—it hadn't been hard remembering his Southern upbringing and manners, which seemed to put the older woman at ease. The two young women, however, didn't seem impressed with his manners. In fact, they both seemed lost in their thoughts.

The train continued its jostle and roll, forcing his leg and shoulder
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to brush lightly against the tense girl beside him. The polite thing to do would have been to slide over and give her some space, but Logan made no attempt to move, enjoying the small contact. After all, he was a man—not a saint.

"I hear a slight accent, Mr. Finley, but can't seem to place it," the woman said thoughtfully. "Gracie here is skilled at linguistics and geography. She is one of my star pupils. Can you place his accent, dear?"

Logan stiffened as she turned to him. He hoped she wasn't as good as Mrs. Dobson claimed. The last thing he wanted to do was discuss his upbringing, especially his life as a Southern planter.

"No, ma'am, I don't believe I've heard Mr. Finley speak long enough to place it."

"Well, from your speech and manners, you're certainly not from the city. Tell us, Mr. Finley, where are you from?"

"I'm originally from Mexico," Logan said. "My mother was a Mexican native and my father was an Irish immigrant." He felt Gracie's gaze on him and turned to her. There was a curiosity in her eyes he hadn't expected, but it made him want to share all of himself, if only to have her continue looking at him with such interest. But he wasn't an idiot. The minute he mentioned his upbringing in Maryland, it would only open him to questions he had no intentions of sharing with anyone.

"What an unusual mix," Mrs. Dobson murmured. "But that explains your unique inflections."

Logan didn't think so. His "accent" came from years of trying hard to rid himself of his native language. As a young man, new to a foreign country, he'd been more interested in being accepted that he had all but renounced his Mexican heritage. Now, as an adult, he realized his mistake in that because it left him with only a vague memory of his mother's culture and a weak grasp of the Spanish language.

"And where are you lovely ladies headed to?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Montana," Mrs. Dobson replied.

Logan raised a brow. "That's rough territory. What are fine Christian women like you heading out there for?"

The older woman smiled knowingly and patted her bosom. "Don't you worry, Mr. Finley. It's not my first time escorting a couple of blushing brides to their awaiting betrotheds."

Logan tensed, stealing a quick glance at the rigid, silent girl beside him. So she was to be married. He didn't know why that knowledge bothered him, but it did. Very much.

"Montana is a long way from New York."

“Yes, well, finding good Christian women is a rarity in those parts, Mr. Finley. Especially for the Negro man. But our congregation strongly believes in fostering the Christian faith by encouraging the development of family.”

“An important endeavor,” he murmured, hearing the sting of his own insincerity. Not that he didn’t believe in marriage or family, but he certainly didn’t think the church should dictate or concern themselves with who someone chose to spend the rest of their lives with.

Mrs. Dobson tilted her head to the side and studied him. “Whenever you get settled, consider writing to us and we can arrange a suitable union for you as well.”

Logan nodded dutifully but having some innocent lamb who had no idea what she was getting herself into in the wild and rugged territories was not something he wanted in a prospective wife. And that was what both of these young women reminded him of, with their fancy dresses and delicate demeanor.

Whoever their husbands were, they certainly had enough money to see that they traveled in style. But from what he remembered growing up in northern Mexico, which were now US territories, pretty dresses, and proper schooling wasn’t going to do much for them in the lawless lands of the west.

“Well,” he said stiffly, “I wish you three safe travels to Montana.”

Mrs. Dobson smiled and patted her chest again. “As long as we have faith here, all will go well.”

Chapter 4

It wasn't until they reached Chicago that they learned of the outbreak.

It had traveled with them from New York and, from what the doctors had concluded, it was the same cholera epidemic that now plagued half the passengers on their train.

Including poor Mrs. Dobson.

Gracie held the ailing woman's hand as the doctor wiped his hand down his apron.

"She's too ill to continue traveling," the weary doctor announced. He stared down at Mrs. Dobson, studying her with tired eyes as she lay pale and gaunt from dehydration on the narrow hospital bed. "She hasn't fallen as bad as many of the others, but at her age and present condition, a trip to Montana is much too rigorous. She will need rest and plenty of fresh water before she will have enough strength to continue her journey."

The old doctor moved on to the next patient, and Gracie returned her attention to Mrs. Dobson. The small hospital was crowded with sick people who had been struck down by the illness, many of them passengers from their train. It had taken them three days to arrive in Chicago, but the symptoms had been slow in coming. It wasn't until yesterday, after their stopover in Ohio, that they realized how serious the problem was. The symptoms were awful and the pain and discomfort appeared to be unbearable.

Mrs. Dobson mumbled something in her fitful sleep, and Gracie continued to rub her hand, which now resembled dried prunes.

"*Madeline, where are you?*" Gracie mumbled. She couldn't imagine what was taking the other girl so long to fetch fresh water, but Madeline had been gone a while now.

Gracie thanked God that she and Madeline hadn't been struck down by the illness and was glad they had made it to Chicago when they did. Not only was their train to Montana leaving from here, but also the best facilities were in this city, and she breathed a little easier knowing Mrs. Dobson would be properly cared for.

Gracie also thanked God for Mr. Finley, who had carried Mrs. Dobson to the nearest hospital while the other passengers had to wait for additional assistance to arrive.

"How is she?"

Gracie turned to the familiar male voice coming from behind her. "Doing much better than yesterday, thanks for asking." The vomiting had stopped and the sallow color of the older woman's skin had lessen, which Gracie constituted as a major improvement. "The doctor

says she needs water and rest, but she should be fine."

He nodded and came to stand closer to the bed. He began tugging on his gloves and she discreetly averted her eyes. She had noticed the missing digits earlier and wondered what had caused the injury.

His eyes were filled with sincere concern as he looked down at the older woman, and Gracie wasn't surprised by it. Mrs. Dobson always did have a way of making people care for her, even in her most ornery moments. And Mr. Logan Finley was no exception. He had stayed closed with them during their travel, proving to be a better travel companion for Mrs. Dobson than she or Madeline.

"You care very much for her."

Gracie smiled softly, hearing the mild curiosity in his tone. "I've known her since I was a little girl," she said, still rubbing the old woman's arm. "She taught me how to read and write, which is a gift I could never repay."

Mrs. Dobson had also helped her secure employment at the church to bring additional income into her family when her father had returned from the war a crippled, broken man. And when the opportunity to become the wife of a wealthy miner had come along, Mrs. Dobson had come to her and her family first, allowing them to secure their financial future.

"She may sometimes come across as a mean old dragon, but she really is a good woman."

The corner of Logan's lips quirked up, and Gracie found it charming when he did that.

"I've always had a weakness for fiery old women," he teased. Then he turned to her, his eyes probing. She returned her attention to Mrs. Dobson before her mind started imagining things that weren't there.

"And how are you feeling? You and Madeline have been quiet during the trip."

"I'm fine, thank you." Physically she was, but emotionally… It was as if the farther away they pulled away from New York, the harder it was to keep her misery and anxiety at bay, forcing her to draw deeper within herself. Though she did not like to see Mrs. Dobson suffering so, this had been a much-needed distraction.

"Mr. Finley, I—we never got to formally thank you for helping Mrs. Dobson get here." He inclined his head, and Gracie added, "I'm sure if she was awake, she would express her utmost gratitude."

"Am awake."

She and Logan started at the low croak that came from the bed. Mrs. Dobson's sunken eyes were opened in thin slits but as watchful as ever.

"How are you feeling, ma'am?" Gracie asked.

"Thirsty."

Gracie sprang from her seat. "I'll go find you some water." At this rate, she didn't expect Madeline to come back with the water. She knew the girl was experiencing the same fears and anxieties she was and wondered if Madeline had forgotten her task.

Or maybe she had fallen ill.

The thought sprang into her head, and Gracie silently scolded herself for not thinking of that possibility sooner. After she made Mrs. Dobson comfortable, she would go searching for the other girl.

With a bowl of fresh water and sponge, Gracie hurried back to Mrs. Dobson's side. Logan moved aside as she came forward to sponge water into the old woman's mouth.

"Better?"

Mrs. Dobson nodded and turned her head away. "Where is Madeline?" she asked, her voice stronger.

"I sent her to fetch water a while ago," Gracie said. "But I fear she may have fallen ill. I'll ask around the hospital to see if anyone's seen her."

"She may have headed back to the train station," Logan said. "I overheard her asking one of the porters about your baggage."

"Then I'll check there as well."

"Take Faith with you," Mrs. Dobson said.

"Ma'am?" Gracie began. "Are you sure that's necessary?"

"We're in Chicago, dear. You can never be too careful."

With a sigh of resignation, Gracie went through the old woman's folded clothes and pulled out the small derringer. Though she knew how to handle it—another lesson Mrs. Dobson had seen to it that she acquired—Gracie preferred not to.

Gracie grabbed her handbag and slipped the small gun into it before stealing a glance over at Logan. There was an amused gleam in his molten brown eyes, and she couldn't help but return his smile.

"You New York women are full of surprises," he muttered.

"And we're tough too," Gracie teased. His smile widened, and for a moment she was lost in the beauty of that small action. He was really quite handsome, something she had noticed since the day at the courtyard, but he was even more so when he smiled. "Um, thank you again for all you help," she quickly added, breaking the spell between her and the man who had been a comforting presence, though still very much a mystery. "If I don't see you when I return, I'd like to wish you safe travels."

He shook his head. "You can't get rid of me that easy, Ms. Gracie. I'll stay with Mrs. Dobson until you get back."

Gracie inclined her head before she left, quietly relieved that this would not be the last time she would see him.

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Logan followed Gracie until she disappeared through the doors, still thinking of the derringer in her handbag. He had certainly underestimated her—and the old woman.

"I'm a woman of faith, Mr. Finley, but I'm no fool. And a woman should always be prepared to protect herself."

Logan shook his head and took the seat beside her bed. "If I didn't know better, Mrs. Dobson, I would swear you were reading my mind."

She made a sound in her throat that resembled a strangled groan. "Well, I'm glad you do know better. Such witchcraft should not be joked about."

"And how are you really feeling?"

"Like our Lord is calling for me sooner than I'd expected."

Logan could only imagine the hell she was endearing. He had never been stricken with cholera, but he'd seen the effects of it enough to know it was a crippling pain. "Is there anything I can get you to ease your discomfort?"

She shook her head. "Dear Gracie was right. We are tough women."

That he no longer doubted. But there was only one in her group that he wished would relax enough around him to open up. He imagined his charm and politeness did little to impress Ms. Gracie Shaw. She had kept her head buried in a book or newspaper while Madeline had been silent and withdrawn, leaving him to fill Mrs. Dobson's need for conversation.

"I would, however, ask something else of you."

"What is it?"

"Tell me who you really are."

Logan stiffened in his seat. "I told you—"

"Yes, yes, but from that Southern charm, I know there's more to your story than growing up in Mexico."

"For someone barely in recovery, you're quite astute."

"It's my body that's ailing. Not my mind."

Logan didn't understand why the sudden interest, but with a small sigh, he told her a highly condensed version of his true upbringing.

"Why did your father wait until you were sixteen to fetch you?"

"You're a smart woman, Mrs. Dobson. You can understand the delicate nature of a man siring a child outside of his marriage. When my father's wife passed, he immediately made arrangements to bring me to Maryland."

Since his father had never had any living children with his wife, the move had been a way to get Logan proper education so that he would take over his father's lands. Logan didn't hold any resentment
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toward his father for taking him from his mother. She had been well cared for before her passing several years ago, and Logan got the opportunity to gain a complete education. He had also gotten to know a man who may not have been a doting father but had been a good and honorable man.

"I imagined you fought in the war?"

"I did."

He didn't expand on it and she didn't ask. She didn't have to. The bloodiest war in the nation's history had been well documented, and the lives lost during the four-year battle had been devastating on both sides. Win or lose, he was just glad it was over.

"At that age, I can't imagine the adjustment had been easy for you," she finally said, returning to their original discussion. "Being in a new country, learning a new language, and all."

Logan shrugged. "It wasn't. I've been called all kinds of names. Bastard, half-breed, you name it. But I'm a quick learner, and I learned to adapt and, eventually things changed."

"How so?"

"Evidently, Americans are more tolerant of a black Irishman than a Mexican immigrant." Despite his dark features, his Irish descent had made him more acceptable to a group who had no sympathy for those they viewed as different. But his father had been a gainful man—and, more importantly, he'd been generous with his money. His father's sizable donations around the community had allowed their neighbors to forgive Logan's Mexican background. In the end, Logan had quickly learned English, and it hadn't been long before he was speaking their language fluently. "People started to see me as my father's son, and eventually as one of them."

She regarded him thoughtfully. "If you never told me about your Mexican heritage, I would have never guessed it. You've completely conformed to this new culture, and it doesn't seem to bother you much."

"It doesn't because I know who I am." And though it had taken some time, Logan had eventually learned to accept it. He had lived two separate lives, and there were times the two sides of him were at war with each other. He'd spent about half of his life in Maryland and considered himself a full American. But the part of him that he had succeeded in hiding away at times fought to be recognized.

"And that's why I like you, Mr. Finley. You're very sure of yourself, and the girls will need someone like you."

Logan cocked a brow, confused. "Ma'am?"

"To see them to Montana."

"And why would I be going to Montana?"

"Because, unfortunately, I won't be. Those girls need someone

strong and smart and with a moral compass to see them to their husbands, not some sick old woman who can barely stand upright."

"You do understand my passage to Colorado is already bought and paid for? My train leaves early tomorrow morning."

"The girls' train also leaves early tomorrow morning. Their fiancés have arranged passage on a Pullman sleeper car for them, which will make travel for the three of you quite comfortable. And without the many stopovers, the trip should be rather quick."

Logan shook his head in exasperation. She really was a stubborn one. "I can see to it that they arrive to their car on time tomorrow, and without incident, but beyond that I can't go any further with them."

To his amazement, Mrs. Dobson managed to narrow her eyes at him. "Are you in such a hurry to get to your destination, Mr. Finley, that you can't escort my girls to their fiancés?"

He wasn't, but Logan also didn't like the idea of spending more time with a woman he wanted just so he could bring her to another man.

A man who would have all the rights to do to her what Logan couldn't stop thinking about.

"Mrs. Dobson—"

"Before you reject the offer," she interrupted, "I can assure you that I will send telegrams to Mr. Robert Whitaker and his business partner, Mr. Walter Mercer. They will know of my condition and I will inform them that, with your assistance, they should expect the girls as scheduled. These men have made a fortune for themselves out there. I can't see why they wouldn't compensate you for your troubles."

Logan thought about that. Not that he would expect compensation from these men, but the possibility was certainly a motivator and would especially come in handy when it came time to purchase equipment for his homestead land. Then again, the trip could prove to be a waste of his time if he walked away with nothing. "And what if these men aren't feeling so generous?"

"Then you would have the satisfaction of knowing you did something good for two lovely ladies." After a brief pause, Mrs. Dobson added, "Maryland was a slave state, Mr. Finley. Did you own slaves?"

He wondered at her sudden change of topic. "Yes."

"How many?"

"Six." At the time of his arrival to his father's tobacco farm fourteen years ago, there had only been three. Several had run off during his father's absence. Another had been whipped to death by the overseer. The incident had enraged his father and resulted in the man's dismissal. Over time, they had managed to restore those that

had been lost to them.

"Did you set your slaves free before the war?"

Logan slowly shook his head, trying not to let the disapproval in her tone elevate his guilt. At first, having slaves had been a jarring experience for him. Referring to people as possessions and having complete control over their well-being had been completely foreign to Logan. But over time, he'd grown accustomed to it and the life he'd once known in Mexico had become a distant memory. Logan had once believed that he had a good relationship with his slaves. That illusion had quickly faded, however, when they had fled from the plantation at the start of the conflict. And he couldn't fault them. Benevolent or not, he had still been their master with complete control over their lives. What man wouldn't run from that?

"Well, they are free now," Mrs. Dobson said. "And you certainly paid the price for that. Now I ask that you find it in your heart to escort two beautiful Negro girls to their future homes. Like you and every other man, they are only fulfilling their duties as daughters to marry and raise families of their own. We both know how cruel this world can be, and I could never forgive myself if something were to happen to them before they could arrive to their betrotheds."

Logan stared at the old woman, a bit amused by her cunning. Apparently Mrs. Dobson was not above manipulation. Unbeknownst to her, however, saddling him with guilt in order to see this done was not required. He knew in his heart he could never let two young women—Negro or otherwise—make the trip through the rough, rugged terrain alone.

"You, Mrs. Virginia Dobson, are one shrewd old woman."

Her dry lips parted in a weak smile, and she even managed a small chuckle. "Not bad for a dragon, eh?"

Chapter 5

Finding Madeline was proving to be quite a chore.

The girl hadn't been at the hospital, and it wasn't until Gracie had given up her search around the train station that she spotted her. The train platform was the last place Gracie expected to find Madeline, yet there she stood, satchel in hand as if she were waiting for the next train.

"Madeline? What are you doing here? I've been looking all over for you. Where's the rest of our luggage?"

The other woman's dark eyes were wide with panic. "I…uh…was told it would be transferred to our sleeping car."

Gracie frowned and stared pointedly at the bag clutched in her hands. "Then what are you doing here?"

Madeline fumbled with her words until she finally blurted, "Gracie, please don't tell."

Her frown deepened. "What…? What's going on?"

Tears welled in Madeline's eyes. "I can't go through with this. I won't."

Gracie gaped at the other woman when it dawned on her what she was doing. "Madeline, you can't just…run off. Where do you plan to go? What about Mr. Mercer? And Mrs. Dobson?"

"I'll figure something out, but I can't marry that man. Not when my heart still belongs to my Jimmy."

Gracie could only imagine what the girl was feeling having lost the man that she loved, but what Madeline was considering was ludicrous. "Madeline, I can only imagine your pain, but you're going to have to let it go. Jimmy is gone, but I'm sure he would want you to find someone else to love again. To be happy with."

"That is why I have to go. I know I won't be happy marrying some stranger and I can't give myself to a man I don't love."

Gracie stared searchingly at the desperate woman then blew out a frustrated breath. What was she to tell Mrs. Dobson? Worse yet, what were they to tell the girl's fiancé when they arrived in Montana? Though Gracie sympathized with her, she didn't like the awkward position Madeline was now placing her in.

"Why did you agree to the contract? Why did you let it get this far?"

Madeline shrugged. "Because I was confused. Mrs. Dobson made it seem as if this was the best option for me, but I realize it's not. There are women out there organizing now, demanding women's rights, and I mean to join them."

Gracie had read about those organizations, and from what she

gathered, many of those women were more interested in *white* women's rights and were vocally against supporting the rights of blacks until their rights were recognized. As a Negro woman, she couldn't support a cause that would force her to choose when she and other black women would never truly be recognized or valued either way.

But she wouldn't fault Madeline for going after what she believed in. Maybe she would be the voice needed in these organizations to convince these women that independence for *all* was what should be fought for—women and Negros alike.

"*Please*, Gracie. I don't want to be trapped in a marriage I don't want."

Gracie didn't want that either, but she had not been thinking of her wants when she'd agreed to this marriage, and she wouldn't start now.

Madeline clutched her arm. "This is my chance to truly be free. Help me."

Moved by the girl's final plea, Gracie sighed in acquiescence. "All right, but promise you'll write them as soon as you're able. Mrs. Dobson is going to be worried sick when she finds you gone."

Madeline visibly relaxed. "I promise. Just tell her I took a train back to New York, and once I'm settled, I'll write to her and Mr. Mercer."

Gracie stared at the other woman. She had a feeling returning to New York wasn't the girl's plan, but she didn't ask. The less she knew, the less she would have to lie. Then, to Gracie's surprise, Madeline gave her a quick hug.

"Thank you, Gracie. I pray you find your happiness out there."

Gracie prayed for the same thing too for, in that moment, she envied the other woman.

She waited with her and it wasn't long before the last departing train arrived. A sinking feeling settled in Gracie's gut as she watched Madeline board and the hollowness in her grew as she watched the train pull off.

Gracie sank down on the bench behind her and watched the train until it became nothing more than a thin point in the distance—until the sun set and there was no one except her and her despair on the empty platform.

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It was at the train station that Logan found Gracie sitting alone, looking more desolate than any woman should under the hanging kerosene lamp.

Night had fallen and when she hadn't returned, fear had begun to settle in him. There were a number of things that could have befallen
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a lone woman wandering the city and thoughts of those possibilities had jerked him away from Mrs. Dobson's bedside. The train station had been his first stop and he was so relieved to find Gracie in one piece, he was tempted to throttle her.

Though she appeared to be unharmed, there was something about her unnatural stillness and forlorn expression that worried him.

"Gracie? Why are you sitting out here?"

She glanced at him then blinked. "Mr. Finley, what are you doing here?" Then her eyes widened with fright. "Is Mrs. Dobson all right?"

"Yes, she's fine. She's resting," he said, taking the seat beside her and removing his hat. "I came looking for you when it grew dark. What are you doing sitting here alone? Do you know what time it is?"

She blinked again then glanced around the empty platform. "Sorry if I caused any worry. I was just…" She sighed. "I was just seeing Madeline off."

"What do you mean?"

She shook her head. "Never mind. It's nothing you need to concern yourself with."

He frowned, not appreciating her easy dismissal of him or his genuine concern for her. "Bother me anyway."

In quick, albeit hesitant words, she told him about Madeline and her decision to return to New York. There was a solemnness that still lingered in her eyes, however, and he wondered if there was more she wasn't telling him.

"Is that what has you upset?"

He didn't miss the fear or apprehension on her face when she glanced away from him. What could bring on that kind of despair?

"Why do believe I'm upset?"

It's all in your eyes, angel.

But Logan didn't tell her that. It was the one thing she hadn't succeeded in masking and he didn't want her to start.

"You've been sort of quiet since we left New York. Is there something the matter?"

Her eyes were once again haunted and he had to restrain himself from pulling her into his arms. Without thinking, he blurted out the verse that had served as a mantra to him for many cold dreadful nights. "I prayed to the Lord and he freed me from all my fears."

Her eyes widened and he smiled at the astonishment he read in them. He wasn't a very religious man, but that short prayer had accompanied him in and out of many battles.

Suddenly the sadness faded from her eyes and was replaced by a small spark. "Why, Mr. Finley, are you quoting Psalms thirty-four to me?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. All I know is that it's from the bible

and has seen me through some tough times."

She glanced away from him and stared off into the distance. "I think it's seen my father through some difficult times as well." She fell silent for a moment before she turned back to him, a small smile gracing her full lips. "Thank you, Mr. Finley."

He cocked a brow. "For what?"

"For reminding me of my faith and that I'm not alone. Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee." At his blank stare, she laughed softly. "Psalms fifty-five, Mr. Finley."

"Right," he muttered.

"At any rate, I realize the burden I carry is not my own. As long as I have faith, all will be well." She laughed again when he glanced down at the handbag on her lap, where Mrs. Dobson's derringer undoubtedly nestled inside. "I mean *real* faith. As in the biblical sense."

He returned her smile, pleased to see that she had worked out whatever it was that had brought on that forlorn look on her face.

Suddenly, she shot up from her seat and squared her shoulders as if she were readying herself for combat. "I should head back to the hospital now."

Logan followed her up as he donned his hat. He didn't miss the way she took a small step back—putting distance between them as she had done numerous times before. He didn't take offense because he knew the subtle move was due to her physical awareness of him.

And he wanted to think that he wasn't the only one who sensed this unrelenting attraction between them.

"I'll walk with you." At the start of her refusal, he added forcefully, "Please, I *insist*."

The corner of her lips lifted as she clutched the handbag close to her. "I'm no damsel in distress, Mr. Finley. You don't have to escort me as if I'm some helpless maiden."

My, was she stubborn.

But Logan took it all in stride, winking as he tipped his hat. "I'm not walking you because you're a maiden, Gracie. I'm doing so because I'm a man."

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At the hospital, Gracie braced herself against Mrs. Dobson's outrage.

"What do you mean she *left*?"

"Ma'am, please calm yourself," Gracie said, worried by the sudden flush on the older woman's face. Breaking the news of Madeline's sudden departure had been as hard as she expected, but had she anticipated the level of the ailing woman's ire, she would have waited until morning. "Madeline is simply returning to New
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York. She says she will write you as soon as she arrives."

Mrs. Dobson continued to sputter in outrage before she screeched, "The nerve of that foolish girl!"

Gracie sat and listened as Mrs. Dobson went on about the impropriety and selfishness of Madeline's actions. Logan stood on the opposite side of the hospital bed, and Gracie threw him an apologetic look. She was sure he had better things to do with his evening than listen to the other woman harp on, yet like a gentleman, he stayed without interruption.

"And you, young lady," Mrs. Dobson said, directing her wrath toward her. "Why didn't you try to stop her? Why didn't you come get me or Mr. Finley?"

Gracie suppressed a sigh of frustration, silently cursing Madeline for leaving her to deal with this mess—all while secretly wishing she had boarded the train with her.

"I'm sure Ms. Gracie did everything she could," Logan suddenly interjected.

Gracie glanced at him and he gave her a quick wink. Only moments ago, he had dropped the formality between them and though she hadn't invited him to do so, she had secretly taken some pleasure in his easy familiarity.

"If Madeline was determined to leave," he continued, "nothing—and no one—could have stopped her. Not me and certainly not you, madam."

Mrs. Dobson's frown was unrelenting, though they all knew his claims were valid. "Well, this is highly unusual and a complete inconvenience." She glanced at Gracie and then back at Logan. "She will need you now more than ever."

Gracie frowned. *Who? Madeline?*

Logan nodded. "I've already agreed to the role, Mrs. Dobson. I won't go back on my word."

Her fierce scowl relaxed some. "Excellent. Now, before you two depart in the morning, I will need you to arrange for my telegram to be sent."

"Telegram?" Gracie hadn't meant to blurt the question, but their obscure discussion had her at a complete loss.

"Yes, dear. I will need to send word to Mr. Whitaker about the changes in our travel plans, and Madeline has put me in the awkward position of explaining her shameless act. But Mr. Finley has graciously agreed to escort you to Montana in my stead, so you have no need to worry."

Stunned, Gracie turned to find Logan watching her closely. She wasn't sure if she was more staggered by the realization that she would be heading to Montana with a man who was virtually still a

stranger to her or from the delight she felt of having him close.

She wondered why he hadn't mentioned this arrangement earlier when they had been at the train station. It didn't matter now. The plans had apparently been set and if he expected her to protest, he would be slightly disappointed.

"All right," Gracie murmured, detecting the small flicker of surprise in his eyes. As much as she had enjoyed boasting to him of her independence on their way back to the hospital, she was grateful for the company. Stranger or not, he was a familiar face, and she needed that if she was going to endure the long trip without her educator and mentor.

Besides, he was truly a decent sort, if his attempt at uplifting her spirits earlier with bible verses was any indication. Gracie smiled at the memory, still touched and charmed by his gesture.

"Great. It's settled, then," Mrs. Dobson said.

"I believe it is." Logan turned to her, his heated gaze lingering on her in that familiar way of his, which she was beginning to believe may not be entirely in her imagination. "I'll be back for you in the morning, Ms. Gracie. You ladies have a good evening."

Chapter 6

It was barely dawn and already their morning was off to a bad start.

Though lost luggage shouldn't have put her in such a sour mood, Gracie couldn't help it. There was one luggage in particular that she wanted back. It held all of her past and memories in it, and she couldn't bear the thought that those things were lost to her forever.

"Are you sure you couldn't find it? The conductor confirmed all the bags were accounted for."

Of course he would, Gracie thought. How the man could make such a bold claim was beyond her. Like Mrs. Dobson, many of the passengers who had fallen ill had not been well enough to continue their travel, which left the baggage and their train car barely half filled.

"I'm very sure," she said. "Perhaps they were brought to the hospital? There are so many passengers still there. Maybe the porters had them mistakenly delivered there."

"If that's the case then there's no way we'll be able to get them in time," Logan said. "The train's departing soon."

Her heart sank. "Is there any way we can ask them to wait? At least long enough for us to check?"

The moment the words were out of her mouth, the shrill whistle of the train sounded, signaling the train's impending departure.

Gracie moved around him and headed toward the car door. Logan grabbed her arm and pulled her to a stop.

"Where are you going?"

She barely glanced back at him. "I have to find the conductor."

"I highly doubt the conductor will delay the train for a few pieces of missing luggage."

"Well, I have to try," she said, tugging away from his grip. He held her fast.

"Why is it so important to you?" he snapped, his dark brows pulled together. "I'm sure your rich fiancé can afford to replace whatever it is you're missing."

She stiffened then jerked out of his grasp. "Family mementos, letters from my friends and students. Those things are irreplaceable, Mr. Finley." And now they were gone. Tears of frustration welled in her eyes and she quickly blinked them away.

"Christ," he muttered, running a hand through his hair.

"Please don't take the Lord's name in vain."

He arched a brow though his lips curved slightly in amusement. "Your luggage is probably buried somewhere in the baggage car,

which we can check again later. Okay?"

The doors to the train car were shut as the final train whistle blew. She nodded stiffly, resigning herself to the fact that she couldn't do anything about it now.

"Wait here," he said, then left her in the small sitting compartment.

Settling herself in her seat, she stared out the window. The sunny landscape came into full view as the slow shift of the train wheels rolled and slowly pulled away from the station.

With the sleeper car sparse of passengers, they were able to claim a section of the train for themselves. It was a nice change from the crowded train they had traveled in from New York. Gracie now understood why Mr. Whitaker had arranged their passage on the Pullman car. The friendly black porters had been pleasant and courteous, and with their fine woodwork and plush upholstery, the compartments were spacious and comfortable.

The fact that any Negro man, even a mulatto, could afford such comforts still baffled her. A part of her almost wondered if her future husband was actually being considerate of her comforts or if he was more interested in flaunting his wealth.

Don't be ungrateful, she chided herself. No matter why he was doing it, she should be thankful that she and her family would not go without.

Gracie watched as the distant hills and broad fields rolled by, grateful the anxiety that had churned in her stomach recently had not returned. In a few days, she would arrive at her destination and would finally meet the man she was to spend the rest of her life with. She closed her eyes and like she had done for many nights since, she gave a silent prayer that Mr. Robert Whitaker would prove to be a caring and considerate husband. She also gave a prayer for Madeline and Mrs. Dobson—and Mr. Logan Finley. Gracie had never expected to find herself traveling with a stranger to an unfamiliar part of the country, but she had to say she was glad for his company. In this very moment, he was the closest thing she had to a friend.

When she opened her eyes again, she stifled a small gasp. Logan stood over her, an unreadable expression on his face. For a well-built man, he moved with such stealth she hadn't even heard him.

How long was he watching me? But it seemed as if he was always watching her with the same burning look in his amber brown eyes.

"Did you speak with the conductor?" She hadn't meant to blurt out that question, but she was desperate to break the tense silence between them.

"Yes. The final stop will be in Nebraska," he said, taking the seat across from her. "We will be able to check the baggage car again

then."

She nodded, though they both knew, with the vacancies on board, the likelihood of her missing bag being hidden were slim. But she appreciated his effort. "Thank you, Mr. Finley."

"Logan." He motioned around the closed compartment. "I think with all things considered, we can drop the formality."

Perhaps.

But formality was the only thing keeping her from giving in to the tug of attraction that drew her to him. It would be wise of her to maintain that distance, but something about him made her want to fall into his arms and, at the same time, get as far away from him as she could. Not because she feared or didn't trust him, but when it came to Logan Finley, she didn't trust herself.

They fell silent and, like she'd done these past few days, she pulled out the newspaper she'd purchased in Chicago and began reading. Logan placed his hat on the seat beside him and, with arms folded, leaned back and closed his eyes. Gracie tried to ignore his knees as they brushed against hers, focusing her attention instead on losing herself in the articles.

She loved reading ever since Mrs. Dobson had taught her. She read everything and often. When she had come into a certain age, she had tried to share her love of the written word by teaching her family, but only her father had made the time—and had the patience—to pick up the skill. Her mother had found no use for it, not when working and maintaining a roof over their heads had been the ultimate priority.

But for her, reading was not only a great escape from reality, it was also a way into a world her people were not allowed in. Barely two years had passed since the laws forbidding slaves to read had been removed, and she was all the more adamant that she continue to read widely.

Unfortunately, however, she couldn't lose herself in the pleasures of reading. It no doubt had everything to do with the man sitting across from her and his hard-to-ignore presence. With Madeline and Mrs. Dobson's company, she had managed to at least get through one paragraph without her mind wandering to him or the warmth of his leg rubbing against hers—or the way his hard body seemed to exude power and strength.

Gracie snapped the newspaper pages together and laid them on her lap. Stealing a quick glance at Logan, she found him peering at her through lowered lids.

"Bad news?"

"No," she said, her cheeks warming as the lingering thoughts of him still drifted in her mind. "Just…bored."

“For a city girl, I can only imagine life on the frontier isn’t going to get any more exciting than this.”

She shrugged. “Maybe. But I was born on a plantation, so I’m not afraid of long stretches of land or hard work.”

He frowned. “You were a slave?”

“I was born a slave, but we fled when I was four years old. I don’t remember much about it, but I do remember the open land and being out in the field with my mother at times, and how we would always smell of tobacco by the time we got to our cabin.”

“A tobacco farm?”

She shrugged. “I believe that’s what it was. Most of the plantations in Maryland were tobacco farms so I imagine it was. I just know that the smell always brings me back to our small cabin.”

At the time, she hadn’t understood how little power and control they had over their lives. And it wasn’t until after her father had been whipped, and they had fled that night, that she realized their small cabin had been more their prison then their home. “The night we escaped was the longest night of my life. I don’t remember ever being so scared. Not even on the night we feared the draft riots would leave the city and come to us.”

His dark brows were pulled together as he regarded her curiously. “If you were born a slave, you would have be given your owners last name. I don’t remember any Shaws in Maryland with a tobacco farm.”

“That’s because there weren’t. I was born on the Flynn plantation, but my father changed our surnames when we reached Pennsylvania. He took the name of the first supporter who had offered us shelter our first night.” Gracie remembered the night more vividly then she should have after fourteen years, remembered the beacon of light that had glowed in the distance and had been their salvation after a long, weary night.

Logan fell silent, his body suddenly rigid. He stared out the train window and for a moment, she wondered if he was uncomfortable with the discussion. She didn’t usually speak so candidly of her past with whites, much less a white stranger, but she was proud of what her parents had accomplished as two former illiterate slaves. They had come from nothing and yet had managed to bring up two educated children.

Suddenly he balled his injured hand into a fist and clutched at it. Though he tried to hide it, his jaw was clenched and his cheeks were pinched with pain.

“Are you all right?”

He nodded, still rubbing his gloved hand. She had witnessed her father go through the same ordeal with his missing arm, clutching at the area as if he was in great pain. She wondered if Logan was

experiencing the same phantom pains her father did. She had caught a glimpse of his mutilated digits at the hospital, but since then he had been careful to keep them covered.

"Is your hand paining you?" she eventually asked when the ordeal seemed to have passed and the set of his jaw was now relaxed.

He nodded briskly and returned his attention out the window. "Yeah, but it's nothing."

She fell silent for a moment then said, "You know, my father lost his right arm in the war. There were times he would grab at his missing arm and his face would be twisted in pain. It was always 'nothing' with him too, and eventually my mother and I stopped asking him." Her mother would just begin to massage her father's shoulder or place a hot compress over the amputated area. That had always seemed to help. "Do you wear the gloves to help with the pain?"

"No."

When he didn't elaborate, Gracie asked, "May I ask why do you keep your hands covered, then?" Since they left Chicago, he hadn't removed the gloves. She could understand why he kept them on in public but it was only the two of them in the small compartment.

Logan turned to her. "Because I don't want to repulse you."

Gracie's eyes widened in surprise by that admission, then she shook her head. "Don't be ridiculous," she muttered, taking his hand.

"What are you doing?"

There was a tightness in his tone, but he didn't pull away from her grip. She continued to peel the thick glove from his injured hand. The scar tissue had caused the skin to become thick, with angry marks that had healed over into jagged white streaks. She began to gently massage his hand, rubbing and kneading his palm until she felt the tendons relax.

"Better?"

He nodded but said nothing. Gracie continued her gentle kneading.

"What happened?" she eventually asked.

He hesitated for a moment. "It happened during the war."

She glanced up at him in disbelief, though it shouldn't have come as a surprise. From the short time she'd spent with him, she figured he was someone who fought for what he believed in. What battle had he fought that led to such mutilation?

"My father was also a Union soldier. He always said he fought alongside some very brave men."

Tension once again invaded him. "I fought for the Confederacy."

Her movements stilled. This time, she couldn't mask her astonishment. He didn't behave like a man who believed in such a

brutal foundation such as slavery. How could someone who fought for such a degrading institution be so…kind? And how many Negro soldiers had he slaughtered with this hand?

The hand she was now providing comfort for.

Gracie thought of her father and his injury. A man very much like Logan had been the cause of that. Her father had endured unimaginable pain to end slavery, and this man sitting across her had fought to keep it?

A pang shot through her, but she was glad she managed to conceal her outrage. Gracie slowly released his hand, her movements stiff. Why should she ease the pain of a man who had fought to keep her people enslaved?

"A quick massage and hot towel always seemed to help my father," she muttered, keeping her eyes averted. She concentrated on the unnecessary task of arranging her skirts, wanting to fill the awkward silence that had suddenly settled between them.

"Thank you," he said, clenching and unclenching his hand.

She nodded and noticed he kept the glove off this time.

"You're not going to ask me *how* it happened?"

She stiffened, not sure she wanted to know. But she heard the slight teasing in his voice and forced herself to relax. He was clearly making light of her curious nature. He wasn't here to hurt her.

The war was over.

Slavery has ended.

You don't have to be afraid anymore.

"How?" she asked, her curiosity eventually winning out.

He stared down at his hand and his eyes took on a faraway look as if he was being pulled back into that time. "Another soldier and I were tasked with transporting a group of Union soldiers to a nearby prison camp where we held the prisoners. I was surprised when the other soldier decided to release them into the wilderness. I didn't try to stop him. I figured whether they took their chances in the wild or came back with us, they were dead men anyway. They had no weapons and the conditions of the camps…not many survived."

Gracie clamped her hands together tightly on her lap and unconsciously glanced down at his hands. She kept her voice light when she asked, "Did those prisoners attack you?"

He scoffed and glanced up at her then. There was a hollowness in his brown eyes that frightened her and made her ache for him, despite his decision.

Logan glanced at the window again. "No, I got my hand shot at because I tried to keep the other soldier from committing murder in front of me. It wasn't smart on my part to grab the firing end of a gun, but the son of a bitch took me by surprise." He shook his head and

absently rubbed his injured hand. “I had joined the war to fight for my home that had been pillaged and destroyed, and to honor my father who had been slaughtered in Sharpsburg along with ten thousand others. But I hadn’t signed up to gun down defenseless men as they fled from us.”

Gracie slowly released her breath, but didn’t speak. She couldn’t. She didn’t have to ask if these fleeing prisoners were black because she knew they were. Reports of black soldiers being massacred upon captivity by the Confederate army had been written about in the papers and that was a harsh fact they both were aware of. She had read about the brutal attacks on Negro soldiers across the country, had heard about the massacre at Fort Pillow, yet hearing Logan recount such brutality was no less jarring.

But, black or white, no one deserved to die like that. How those men must have felt, knowing they were moments away from death? Gracie glanced down at his hand again. How Logan must have felt putting himself in harm’s way for men he was supposed to see as his enemies?

“Why are you telling me this?” she asked quietly.

“I fought in the war to honor my father, Gracie,” he said after a long pause. “Regardless of what caused it.”

You mean slavery. She continued to study his still form. As bad as she wanted to know, she could quite bring herself to ask if he himself had owned slaves.

“Do you regret saving their lives?”

He scoffed. “Getting shot for some Blue Coats was never my intention, but I was a soldier, not a murderer. I had joined the war for two reasons. My father and my home.” His gaze was transfixed on the rolling hills outside the window. “But after that day, I wasn’t sure what the hell I was fighting for anymore.”

Gracie turned to look out the window as well, the slow rocking of the train oddly easing some of her tension. He always seemed so sure of himself, so confident that she would have never imagined he too struggled to find a place to belong.

His journey west suddenly became clearer to her. Logan wasn’t only looking for a new start, he was looking for his place and purpose in this great country. Just as she was.

“So…” she began, still looking out at the captivating landscape. The hills that rolled by were high and green, and the vast mountains painted a dusky silhouette in the backdrop. “What happened to the other soldier after he shot you?”

The silence that followed was answer enough.

Chapter 7

Logan couldn't have asked for smoother travel.

For three days, they rode in the sleeper car without incident, enjoying each other's company. At least Logan had.

There weren't many women like Gracie Shaw—polite and delicate on one hand and fiery and passionate on the other, especially when it came to social issues and politics. He enjoyed playing devil's advocate with her just to see her riled, to see the passionate woman come alive from inside her proper Christian exterior.

Besides their lively debates, they found other ways to pass the time and ease their restlessness. He taught her how to play poker and even a few card tricks, while she occasionally read or sang short hymns. He enjoyed her singing. When he confessed as much, telling her that she had the voice of an angel, he had gotten the pleasure of watching her turn sweetly bashful.

Everything about her was lovely, and he wouldn't have minded another three days on the rocking train if it meant spending more time in her company. The past three days had been like a breath of fresh air, and she was that lightness he had been searching for.

By the time they reached Nebraska, he knew he had fallen hard.

"I have good news and bad news," Logan said as he came up to where she waited on the train platform.

"Okay," she said, inhaling deeply. "Bad news first."

He couldn't help but smile as he watched her visibly steel herself. "The missing luggage is not on the baggage car. We searched and… nothing."

Her shoulders fell, but she didn't look as distraught about it as she had in Chicago. He imagined she hadn't been hopeful about them finding it hidden behind another piece of luggage somewhere.

"And the good news?"

His smile widened and he paused before replying, building her anticipation. "They found it in Chicago and it's on the way here. It should be arriving on the next train."

She gaped at him for a moment then cried out and threw her arms around him. "*Oh, thank you!*"

The hug was unexpected, but he instinctively wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. Her soft frame pressed solidly against his, and he breathed in her sweet scent. His reaction to her nearness, her touch, was nothing short of salacious, but he reveled in it. For three long days he had wanted to do this—wanted to know how she would feel in his arms.

She felt perfect.

Without thinking, he pressed his lips along the smooth, warm curve of her neck. A slight tremor passed through her before she stiffened and pushed away from him. He released her.

"Please don't do that," she said, wrapping her arms around herself and fixing her gaze on his chin.

Embarrassed, he ran his gloved hand through his hair. He wanted her like he had never wanted anyone in his life, but it was an impossible fulfillment and he needed to remember that.

"Sorry."

"That can *never* happen again."

"It won't," he said tightly. "You have my word."

She glanced down at her hands, her shoulders slumping in what he could only imagine was relief, and he gritted his teeth in annoyance. Never had he thought he would want a woman so much that he didn't care she was promised to another. If she would let him, he would do more than steal a quick kiss on her neck. But she wouldn't betray her fiancé's trust, and he could respect that.

He just didn't like it.

In silence, they made their way into the relatively popular boomtown, which he assumed, for this part of Nebraska, was as much of a bustling city as it was going to be. If they were going to wait for her late-arriving luggage, they would need to find lodging for the night.

In the underdeveloped town, they passed as many tent homes as they did buildings and cottages. There were also a fair number of drunks and whores littering the streets. Not too far from them, a shouting match between two men escalated into a full-blown fistfight. Logan pulled Gracie close to his side as other men began to gather and cheer them on. His immediate sense to protect her was so instinctive, he didn't realize how tight he was holding her until she patted his hand, and he eased his grip around her waist.

They finally came upon an establishment that looked to be the most reputable in the area. Only a few customers occupied the small saloon inside, and they all sat gawking at them as they walked pass. Logan knew why and kept his hand firmly on Gracie's back as he guided her to the bar.

"Do you have an available room?"

The thinning-haired keeper glanced from them both before he settled his glare on Logan. "Yes, I may have a room or two open. But if you plan to keep her in here, it's going to be extra."

"Fine," Logan barked, feeling the tension in Gracie's back.

"And you be sure to keep her out of sight, God damn it," the man added. "I don't need any trouble around here."

"She won't be any trouble."

"No, *she* won't," Gracie snapped. "Because *she's* not staying here."

Logan cursed as she pulled away from him and rushed out of the door. He followed after her, grabbed her elbow before she could get far, and turned her to face him. He hated to see the distress in her eyes, the tears that she was fighting hard not to shed.

"Gracie—"

"I'm not staying in there. I would rather sleep in a tent then to patronize that foul man's business."

"To hell with him. The man's an idiot, that's for sure, but he also has a warm, safe place for us to stay tonight. And trust me, you'll be happier with a roof over your head. A tent would be no better than sleeping in mud."

She shook her head. "I don't care. That's the beauty of freedom. I can choose what I want to do, where I want to go and when. And I'm not staying in *there*," she snapped, gesturing to the saloon behind him.

"You're being foolish," Logan said sharply. "This town is not the kind of place you want to find yourself camping outside in. Sometimes it's worth putting up with a bit of bullshit for some security."

She wrinkled her nose. "No, it's not. And it's not foolish to demand some dignity. Nothing is worth being looked at with such disgust, or treated with such contempt. I'm tired of you white men going around as if you're some kind of superior race, like those who are different or darker than you don't matter."

Logan gritted his teeth, trying to hold on to his anger. "In case you forgot, I'm also part Mexican."

"And how convenient for you. I can imagine it's a great relief to be able to choose who you want to be on any given day. But for me, it doesn't work like that. I've been handed two disadvantages, and it doesn't matter if I'm an educated free woman or a runaway slave, I will always be just a *Negro woman*. Easily disregarded *and* disrespected."

Silence fell between them like a heavy stone and they stood glaring at each other. So much for keeping his temper in check, he thought. But when he let her words penetrate, he understood where her frustration stemmed. He could understand not wanting others to define or judge who he was because of what he looked like. He couldn't fault her for feeling the same way.

Logan sighed. "Okay, come on. Let's find someplace a little more welcoming."

Except finding a lodge accepting Negros was harder than he'd anticipated. In the end, he had to bribe and pay a sizeable fee to "lease" out an abandoned train caboose for the night. The rustic red train car with the faded words "Pacific Railroad" painted on the side. It sat in a desolate patch far enough away from the town to keep

trouble from wandering this far out to them.

Though the real challenge would be spending one more night with her close by while trying not to touch her.

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Gracie made the best of their accommodations, which wasn't the greatest, but it certainly beat putting up with the bigots in this unruly town. The first tavern keep had been the friendliest in his disdain of her. The other lodgings wouldn't even allow her inside. It had been disheartening to be faced with such discrimination this far west of the country. It was as if no matter how far they ventured, she and every Negro would be treated as second-class citizens—or worse.

Luckily, with Logan's persistence, they had managed to find a suitable place to lay their heads for the night. There were no furnishings inside the abandoned caboose, but he had managed to purchase a kerosene lamp and some blankets, which they spread across the worn floorboards.

She glanced over at him, the soft glow of the lamp highlighting his striking, dark features as he sat on the blanket, his back pressed against the peeling wall of the caboose. Guilt over her verbal attack toward him gnawed at her. He had only been trying to help, and she had let her frustration with the white tavern keeper get the better of her. It wasn't as if she hadn't encountered prejudice before. New York was riddled with whites who held this wild notion of supremacy and staunchly believed against miscegenation.

But then there were others who saw people for who they were and didn't put themselves above others, like Mrs. Dobson—and Logan. Despite the fact that he had fought for a system that was designed to strip people of their basic rights as humans.

Gracie settled down beside him and began to spread their simple meal across the blanket. "I'm sorry about my outburst earlier," she said quietly, keeping her focus on her task, not quite meeting his gaze.

He shrugged. "Don't apologize for speaking your mind. At least not with me."

A small smile threatened to tug at her lips. She knew he liked purposely goading her into arguments, being contrary and often contradicting himself. It had taken her a while to pick up on his ploy, and she wasn't sure why he insisted on provoking her, but then, she enjoyed their spirited discussions too much to call him out on it.

"No, it wasn't very polite of me to attack you like that. Not when you've been nothing but kind to me and helpful these past few days."

He said nothing, and they concentrated on their simple supper of cornbread and cured meat. She couldn't believe how fast time had crept up on her. By tomorrow night, she would be in Montana—in her future husband's home—and tonight would be just a distant memory.
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She scoffed at herself, recognizing that lie. She would never forget the time she spent with Logan, even if part of that time had been in a dingy, dark caboose in the middle of nowhere.

She certainly wouldn't forget when he had pressed his lips against her neck on the train platform.

Gracie trembled again from the memory, wondering what had been going through his mind when he'd done that. It had been completely unexpected, and yet her body had craved more.

"Why Colorado?" she blurted, wanting to fill the silence with anything but her scandalous thoughts and memories.

He shrugged. "Seemed like a good place as any to settle down and start a new life."

"Do you miss your old one?"

He was silent again for a moment. "That life wasn't really mine." After a short pause, he asked, "What about you? Why did you decide to sell yourself into marriage?"

She frowned at his choice of words, but couldn't deny them. "I wanted to help my family. With my father's injury, work is hard to come by. And being a black man in a state flooded with immigrants makes it even harder, especially since there aren't many jobs around to begin with. This was just another way I could help provide for my family."

And not be a burden.

Though her family had never made her feel anything but loved, she knew that as a soon-to-be nineteen-year-old it was time she started a family of her own. Moving west hadn't been ideal, but there weren't many marriageable men back east—at least, none that had been as generous as Mr. Whitaker.

Yet Gracie tried not to think of Madeline or the envy that still clawed at her at the other woman's daring to follow her heart's desires.

"If you had a choice," Logan said quietly, "would you go through with this marriage?"

Gracie glanced at him, startled. It was as if he'd read her thoughts, and yet she had never given the idea any serious consideration. She slowly shook her head, his gaze piercing into her.

"Why not? Your fiancé seem to be very well off. You would want for nothing."

Except the freedom to choose who I want to love and give my body to.

Her face heated at the thought. "It's not that I don't want to get married," Gracie said carefully. "I just wish I had a chance to do more, to have more going for myself than being some man's wife."

His lips curved up. "What's the role of the woman if not to be a good wife and mother?"

She narrowed her eyes at him before she shook her head with a soft laugh. “Nice try, Logan Finley, but I will not spar with you this night!”

He chuckled. “Coward.”

“Misogynist.”

They grinned at each other like two idiots before she glanced away and stared into the soft glow of the kerosene lamp.

“I sometimes wonder what the Lord has in store for me,” she murmured. “If Montana is the place I’m supposed to be and if Mr. Whitaker is who I’m supposed to be with.”

He was silent for so long. She glanced over at him to find him staring blindly into the light too. There was a distant look in his dark eyes, as if he was lost in the memories of his past, and she wanted to reach out to him, to bring him back to the present—to *her*.

“Logan?”

“I often wonder the same thing,” he finally said. “Finding my place in this world, that is. It seems like no matter where I go, I’m always on this endless search for my purpose in this life.” He glanced up at her then, his eyes bleak. “And I’m still trying to find it.”

Gracie moved closer to him and took his hand in hers. Surprise flashed across his face, but before she could remember herself and pull away, he tightened his grip and pulled her closer.

“*Oh!*” She fell against him, bracing her palms against his broad shoulders. She lost herself in his molten gaze as they stared into each other’s eyes for what seemed like forever. She read the yearning in his and was sure they mirrored her own. His gaze shifted down to her lips, and her breath caught in anticipation. “Logan…I-I’m going to be married.”

He released a low sound that was a mixture of a growl and groan. “Believe me, angel, I haven’t forgotten that.”

For a brief moment, she did. She stared down at his mouth and wondered what it would be like to feel those sensuous lips against hers. Whenever he touched her, her heart and body fluttered in a way it never had for another man, and she wanted to feel that again.

“I’m going to break my promise, Gracie.”

She frowned. “What—”

Before she could react, he pulled her to him and brought his lips down to hers. She gasped softly, but instead of pushing him away, her fingers curled around his shoulders. His mouth moved over hers with a familiarity that left her in a sweet state of suspension, and she released another whimper of pleasure. He broke the intoxicating kiss and moved his lips along her cheek and down her neck. She trembled again from the delicate, heady sensation.

“Have you ever been kissed, angel?” he asked quietly, still trailing

his warm lips along her sensitive skin.

"Yes," she breathed. *But not like that.* Not with such familiarity or deep longing.

"Then I guess I'm going to have to make sure you never forget this one," he murmured, determination clear in his low tone.

With that, he captured her lips once more and again she lost herself in his kiss. He brushed the tip of his tongue against her lower lip, and instinctively she parted them, wanting to taste all of him. She savored the hot, invigorating feel as he slipped his tongue into her mouth with a smooth, gentle caress. Her arms tightened around him and she released a soft moan from the stimulating sensation but didn't pull away from him. Instead, she leaned closer.

Suddenly, Logan shifted and before she knew it, she was on her back, rolled beneath him on the rough blanket as he hovered above her. He ran his palm slowly down the length of her body—over her breasts, down to her waist, to finally rest at her hip. She shivered in his arms, her nipples straining against her dress from the heat left behind by the deliberate action. Gracie knew that accepting his touch and slow kiss was wicked and wrong, but nothing had ever felt so right.

His dark eyes were filled with such hunger and affection, it left her breathless. "Gracie…"

She lightly touched his rough cheek, ignoring the warnings and reprimands sounding in her head. In that moment, she knew she wanted him more then she wanted her next breath. She didn't think about the consequences or about tomorrow—didn't worry about right or wrong. She simply concentrated on the now and her desperate need for him.

"Make love to me, Logan."

Desire so intense flashed across his face, she felt the power of it surging through him. But he didn't question her decision and he didn't hesitate. With a low growl, he captured her lips once more and again, she lost herself in him.

He made short work of their clothes and soon they were naked. "So beautiful," he murmured thickly as he stared down at her.

What lingering shyness she'd held vanished from the longing in his eyes and those two simple words. With a small smile, she pulled him down to her until her breasts pressed firmly against his hard chest. His rigid shaft rested hot and heavy between her thighs and she shivered again from the foreign sensations, excited and nervous from her vulnerable position. But he continued his slow caress, lightly passing his tongue over her beaded nipples. She jerked from the intense pleasure, unrestrained need burning between her thighs and she ached to have him inside her.

“Logan, please…” she breathed, her fingers clutching his hair.

His ragged breathing was sharp against her ear as he licked the delicate skin between her neck and shoulder. A soft tremor coursed through her again and with a low moan, she lifted her hips against his straining member. She wanted to give him all of her and was prepared to take all of him.

Reaching between their bodies, Logan slowly guided himself into her. Gracie gasped as he pushed deep inside her, her body stretching to accommodate him. The pain was intense but fleeting as he began to gently, carefully, thrust into her. She gave in to him—to her desire—willingly and wholeheartedly as he made love to her with such unspeakable tenderness, her body nearly burst from the pleasure of it.

Their bodies danced to a ballad as old as time as she held him tight inside her and she lifted her hips to take more of him. There was no room for shame, no time for regret—only their frantic, base hunger for each other, until together they found sweet fulfillment.

Chapter 8

Logan held Gracie close to his side as she slept.

Her warm breath brushed along his neck, and her soft curves pressed against him. The tight coils of her curly hair lay wild around her head and tickled his cheek. He smiled, remembering just how wild she was in her passion, and still feeling the sting on his back where she had dug in her nails.

Everything about last night had been unexpected. From her fervent desire for him to the way their bodies had come together nicely. She had been sweetly passionate and as insatiable in her desire as he. Physically, they fit together perfectly, and emotionally…he knew he was in trouble.

He continued running his palm along her bare back and hips, enjoying the feel of her smooth skin. From the dim gray light coming through the high, narrow window of the caboose, dawn was almost upon them. He hadn't gotten much sleep, thinking about last night and how good—how right—she had felt in his arms.

He needed to figure out a way to convince her not to go through with her marriage to Whitaker. He didn't have as much money as the man, but he was fit and able and could work to provide for her and whatever children they ended up having.

The image of her round with his baby filled him with such fierce possessiveness that he instinctively tightened his arms around her. Murmuring, she shifted slightly in her sleep, and he eased his hold but didn't let go. Though their lovemaking had been short of incredible, he wanted more than just to sate himself in her body. He wanted her smiles, her laughter—her heart—for himself.

She stirred again in his arms, and he pressed his lips against her hair. He watched as her lips curved up dreamily then she blinked. Then blinked again.

"Logan?"

Beneath his palm, tension traveled along her spine until her once soft, pliant body was rigid against him. Suddenly, she pushed away from him and sat up on the blanket, taking up as much as she could to cover her breasts—the same breasts he had become all too familiar with. He remembered their taste and texture, and his shaft stirred at the memory.

But as much as he wanted her back in his arms, he also wanted to wipe the panic that was burning bright in her large, dark eyes.

"Dear God, what have I done?"

Her whispered appeal was barely audible, but he heard it. He considered himself a compassionate man, and could understand her

confusion and maybe even her guilt over what they had done, but he couldn't tolerate it if she felt ashamed.

"Gracie, it's all right," he said slowly, sitting up but not reaching for her just yet. Not that he didn't want to, but he could sense she needed space right now to process what had happened between them. And more than anything, he wanted her to be the one to come to him.

From the way she vigorously shook her head, he would need to exercise patience before that would happen.

"No, it's not okay," she said. "I'm supposed to meet my future husband today! I'm supposed to be chaste until our wedding night."

Logan tried to tamp down the jealousy that was rising in him. After last night, he didn't want to think about another man seeing and touching her the way he had, the way she had allowed him to.

She brought her hand to her throat, clutching the blanket closer to her. "What do I tell him? I never meant for this to happen but I can't possibly marry him now."

"No, you can't," Logan said, glad she had arrived at that conclusion on her own. "And what happened between us last night is no one else's business. My intention was never to take advantage of you, and I certainly don't intend to bring you to Whitaker as if nothing happened."

Her eyes were solemn. "What are we going to do? I—we—have to atone for this sin."

The remorse in her eyes ate at him, and he reached for her then, carefully pulling her into his arms. She was still tense, but she braced her hand on his shoulders, not holding on to him, but not pushing him away either.

"You don't need to feel ashamed about what happened last night, Gracie. There's something magical between us, and no man can take that away."

"But my family…I agreed to this marriage for them. When I break this contract, they will have to forfeit the payment Mr. Whitaker made for our arrangement. They can't afford to do that."

"They won't have to," he said. "I'll talk to Whitaker. I have money, and I'm sure there is something—stop shaking your head, angel. I'm not going to let you deal with this alone."

"We should speak to him *together*. I need Mr. Whitaker to understand this is not something we planned. I can't do that if I'm cowering behind you or letting you fight my battles."

He gave her a gentle squeeze. "Think of it as being cautious. Marrying Whitaker is not something you—or *I*—want you to do, but he is expecting a wife when we arrive in Montana. We need to approach this situation sensibly when we get there."

"Mr. Whitaker would never—"

"You don't know that," Logan cut in. "And I'm not going to just leave you alone to deal with the man's anger. If it means parting with a few dollars to free you from your contract, then so be it."

She stared at him searchingly. "You would do that for me?"

The corner of his lips quirked. "Yes, angel, I would. I…care about you, and I want us to have a future filled with happiness. Not regret."

She touched his cheek gently, her eyes filling with warmth and… misery. "I care about you too, Logan. But a future together? That would be impossible."

"Nothing is impossible, Gracie. Just know I will do whatever I can to make this right." He smiled crookedly. "Have *faith*."

She relaxed slightly against him and returned his smile. He realized in that moment that he more than cared for her, this beautiful, dark-skinned woman with wild, coiled hair. It wasn't just her gentle yet fiery spirit, or the way she had moved against him in the late hours of the night that had made his desire for her endless. It was the way she put others first, the way she viewed the world through a naïve yet positive lens. She mainly saw the good in people, including him, despite what she knew—and didn't know—about him. If he were honest, he would admit that he was falling in love with his singing angel.

In a few hours, they would be boarding the steamboat and leaving for Montana, and he had only a few hours to think of his approach to Whitaker, because there was no way he could let her marry the man.

She was his now.

Logan sealed his silent declaration with a kiss, and the light touch soon turned hot and explorative until he was once again inside her, thrusting deep to meet the rise of her hips and savoring every moan that tore from her throat.

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"What's this?"

"Breakfast."

Gracie stared down at the small red apple Logan handed her and shook her head. "No thank you. I don't like apples."

Logan frowned. "You have to eat something, angel. It's going to be a long trip, and this is all I have."

She sighed and took the fruit, not prepared to go into an entire discussion about why she loathed the particular fruit. Telling him about the time her taste for them had led to her father being whipped didn't seem like appropriate morning conversation as they waited to board the steamboat.

The memory of her father's pain that day, for such a silly reason, had always haunted her. Had she truly understood at four years old
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what it meant to be a slave, she would have never taken the apple without permission, and then her father wouldn't have been forced to lie about taking it for her, and he would have never had his back flayed. That day, she had lost the taste for the fruit, and today, like many days prior with her students, she was reminded why.

"Why don't you go on ahead and find us a spot to settle. I'm going to make sure all of our bags made it on the boat with us."

Gracie didn't expect the brief kiss Logan landed on her lips, but neither did she shy away from it. After last night—and this morning—she knew without a doubt that she couldn't possibly marry Mr. Whitaker now. Though she didn't want to consider the inconvenience she would place on the man—or the embarrassment to her family—a small part of her was relieved that she would not have to go forward with the arranged marriage. The consequences wouldn't be pleasant, but she was prepared to face them.

She found a quiet spot at the head of the steamboat to wait for Logan. Her strained nerves and excitement made butterflies dance in her stomach. She still couldn't accept how much had changed in such a short time. How much *she* had changed.

Giving herself to a man who wasn't her husband had not been something she'd ever considered doing. It was the very epitome of sin, and yet she didn't feel the level of guilt or remorse she had expected from giving in to her baser needs. Mainly her guilt stemmed from her inconveniencing a man who had spent a considerable amount of money to bring her here—and her guilt for what the end of her contract would mean for her family. She wouldn't lie to Mr. Whitaker and enter into a sham marriage, but neither would she let her family suffer because of her mistake. She would just have to find a way to be resourceful in order to support them.

As Gracie stood at the far end of the steamboat, she realized the advantage of the isolated area. No one could see her standing there. Unless they came closer and peeked around the large cylinder, she had found herself an exceptional hiding spot. She almost thought of her newly discovered sanctuary as a plus, until she realized the one person she had no intentions of hiding from would be looking for her.

Gracie started to leave the secluded area but heard men's voices approaching. She hesitated, waiting for the voices to pass. The last thing she wanted was to reveal her vulnerable position in such an isolated spot.

But instead of walking past, the men paused as another joined them.

"Good day, Massa Flynn."

"Good day, James."

Gracie was so relieved to hear Logan's voice that it took her a

moment to process his next words.

"And I'm not your master anymore. It's just Logan now."

"Yes, sir," the man James said. "You needing help with something, Mr. Logan? I seen you walking all around this boat."

"I'm looking for someone," Logan said. "A young Negro woman in a plaid day dress. Have you seen her?"

"No, sir, can't say I have."

"All right. Well, you let me know if you do."

"Yes, sir."

Gracie slowly released her breath as she heard Logan's strong footsteps fade away. She waited in her hidden spot, still trying to process what she'd heard. Logan had been a slave owner?

Apparently, James and his friend also waited until Logan got out of ear-shot before he spoke again.

"My, I ain't never dream of seeing young Mass Flynn around these parts. Makes a man feel kinda funny."

"How you mean?" his friend asked.

"I don't know… Massa Flynn wasn't an evil man, but it sho' is nice to see how far the white man has fallen. Now I ain't got to be nobody's field nigger no more."

The two men walked off, and Gracie remained frozen in the isolated part of the boat, trembling from her core. She couldn't pinpoint the exact cause for her quivering, but outrage and hate—and immense sadness—tangled themselves into knots inside her.

Flynn.

All the pieces began to fit together as she repeated that name in her head. Logan Finley—no, Logan *Flynn*—Confederate soldier from Maryland. The coincidence was astounding, but it all made sense. She recalled his uneasiness on the train when she made mention of the name and realized he had known all along about their connected past. Why hadn't he said anything?

Because he's a coward, an angry voice burst from inside her. He hadn't even faced her with the truth about himself.

Because he's ashamed, a more sympathetic voice whispered. He had gone as far to change his name and move west to reinvent himself.

Gracie blew out a shuddering breath. It didn't matter why he'd done it. The fact was that he had lied to her, and she had stupidly fallen for his every charm.

She glanced down at her hand and realized she still clutched the bright red apple. Memories of that long-ago time flooded her—the sharp snap of the whip, the shouts of pain from her father…all because she had wanted something to eat. With a small cry, she released the small fruit as if it stung her palm. It fell to the ground

with a heavy thud.

A large lump formed in her throat until she thought she would suffocate from it. Her vision clouded with unshed tears as shame and regret of her naiveté rolled through her. How could she not have seen this? He played the part of an honorable, compassionate man well, but men like him were the reason people like her father bore their battle scars on their bodies and their hearts.

How could she have given herself to a man like Logan—a man who had kept people who looked like her enslaved? And like a fool, she had sacrificed her family's security for a moment of pleasure.

That knowledge made the lump in her throat expand until it weighed down her heart like nothing else ever had.

Chapter 9

"She's a beauty, for sure, Mr. Finley, but that's quite an offer for a Negro woman."

Logan hated having to negotiate for Gracie as if she were some broodmare, but he was willing to offer whatever he needed to get Robert Whitaker to release her from her contract.

And then after, he would ask her to marry him properly. If she would have him.

She had been distant since they had left Nebraska, and he imagined she was either still upset about the tongue lashing he'd given her for the worry she caused him when he couldn't find her on the boat, or she was still feeling guilty about their night together in the caboose. Either way, he didn't like that she was withdrawing from him, and he certainly didn't want her angry at him. He hadn't gotten a chance to tell her that he had every intention of marrying her and making an honest woman of her, but first he needed to deal with Whitaker.

"I appreciate you fulfilling the role of escort for my betrothed when Mrs. Dobson unfortunately took ill, and it should be I who should be paying *you*," Robert Whitaker continued. "Unless there was something Ms. Shaw confided to you? Something I should know about our upcoming nuptials?"

Logan shook his head. "I just want her to have the chance to choose who she will marry."

The man raised a brow and sat back in his seat. "Why? Did something unseemly occur between you and my fiancée, Mr. Finley?"

"No." As far as Logan was concerned, there was nothing inappropriate about their lovemaking. "But I do care for her and will ask her to marry me if she will have me."

"Well, I can see how much you care for her," Robert said, studying him carefully. "It's not every day a white man offers to marry a black woman. And what you're offering couldn't have come at a more opportune time, but I have to say, it's still not enough."

Logan frowned. "I did my research, Mr. Whitaker." Which mainly consisted of calling up his memory of the conversation he had with Mrs. Dobson and asking what kind of expenses would be required to arrange such a union. "The amount I'm offering you is more than fair."

"Perhaps. But if you factor in the travel expenses, the new wardrobe, and the generous donation I made to the church, your offer to reimburse me for my marriage contract to Ms. Shaw falls short. Considerably short."

Logan silently cursed. He was literally offering the man everything he had and still it wasn't enough.

"But," Robert added, "I'm a fair man, Mr. Finley, and you seem to be a man of integrity. I will accept your offer to annul Ms. Shaw's contract. On one condition."

Logan tensed. "What?"

"You sign one of your own. There was an unfortunate accident in one of the mines and we lost a few good men. And with this damn cholera outbreak making its way here, I'm losing workers faster than I can replace them. I could really use a man like you."

"For what exactly?"

"Wherever there is a shortage," Robert said. "You agree to work for me and I will take that as the remaining payment for Ms. Shaw's contract."

Logan weighed his options. Staying in Montana had not been his initial plan and he wasn't familiar with the homesteading laws in this territory. Was he really willing to put his life on hold and place himself in this man's servitude? Did he really want Gracie that much?

"For how long?"

"Six months of servitude is all I need to satisfy the annulment."

Six months seemed like a long time when he was eager to start making his own fortune with lands of his own. But starting that new life didn't seem as refreshing and exciting as it once had. Not if he made it there alone…without Gracie.

Yet he couldn't guarantee that she would want anything to do with him once he revealed the truth of his past to her. Would she still want him when she found out his family once used to own hers?

Logan inwardly flinched at the thought, remembering the moment when he had made the connection—the moment she had touched him for the first time and eased the pain in his hand.

He knew he should have said something to her sooner—should have revealed who he was, and try to convince her as to why it no longer mattered. He wasn't the same man he had been before the war. Things were different—he was different—and he should have explained that to her.

He should have also assured her that he was no stranger to hard work, that he had often worked alongside his slaves, and had never had to beat them into submission. But then again, maybe none of that would have made a difference to her.

Hell, if he were in her place, he wouldn't give a shit about a landowner having to work his own land either.

But if Logan didn't take this opportunity to free her from this commitment to Whitaker, he would never get the chance to ask Gracie to be his.

“All right, but on another condition,” Logan said, not entirely oblivious to his own negotiating power over the man’s apparent desperation. “I get three days off a week and I get to set my schedule.”

Robert was silent for a moment. “That’s quite a proposition, Mr. Finley, but I accept.”

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Gracie couldn’t believe she was free from her marriage contract with Robert Whitaker.

She’d been prepared to offer whatever excuse she needed to break their contract, with a promise to repay the money he’d already spent on her. But thanks to Logan, there was no need. He had gotten her out of this contract and she was now free.

But she wasn’t. Not really.

What was it Logan wanted in return for paying her contract?

They hadn’t spoken since they had arrived in Montana. She had kept her distance, still not fully recovered from what she had learned about him. He, in turn, had given her space.

Gracie now sat on the narrow bed of her rented room above the town’s only tavern. It had been the only place she could afford after the sale of some of her expensive dresses to some of the working women at the neighboring brothel. That money, however, wouldn’t be enough for her to survive on.

Mr. Whitaker had been gracious enough to offer her lodging in his large home, and she had offered to work around his home in exchange, but he had politely declined. “I wouldn’t feel right charging you for lodging, Ms. Shaw,” he had said. “And unfortunately, I’m not in the position to pay you wages. You are, of course, welcomed to stay here as long as you need until you can make other arrangements.”

Gracie, however, hadn’t felt right about accepting his offer for free lodging. And a part of her didn’t want to depend on the man she had once been contracted to marry. It was a relief to see that Mr. Whitaker wasn’t a cruel or vindictive man. He would have probably even made a fine husband.

Just not for her.

She wasn’t the proper Christian woman she had led herself to believe. She had willingly given herself to another man who was not her husband—a man who had kept others in bondage and had killed in support of the harsh system of slavery—and she would have to live with that.

Gracie blinked away the tears she refused to shed for him. She couldn’t be sure if her heartache was due to his lies, or the fact that she still wanted him despite them.

Regardless of why, she didn’t have time to indulge in her sorrow or give him another thought. She needed to figure out what she was
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going to do next in this foreign town. One thing she was certain she needed and that was work.

A knock came at her door, but before she could call out to the person, the door was pushed open. With a loud gasp, Gracie jumped off the bed.

"Logan?"

"Gracie, why isn't your door locked?" He walked into the small room and shut the door behind him. He stopped in front of her, his eyes probing. "What are you doing here? I've been searching all over for you. Why did you leave Whitaker's place?"

Gracie shook her head, torn between raging at him for not being the man she had believed him to be, and cursing him for making it hard for her to hate him because of it. Had their night together in Nebraska meant anything to him, or had he taken her out of some warped sense of superiority?

"You lied to me." She hadn't meant to blurt out the words, but they came out and she couldn't pull them back. It didn't matter *why*. What mattered was that he hadn't, and she had done the unthinkable…

She had fallen in love with him.

Her heart twisted at the realization, and she turned away from him, her stomach knotting. She wouldn't deny how she felt any longer. But that didn't mean she could forgive him or overlook the kind of man he really was.

"I'm sorry if you think I went behind your back, Gracie. I probably should have told you about my talk with Whitaker, but I didn't want you to worry if he turned out to be difficult about it. Luckily, he was reasonable about everything, and we finalized our deal today."

Gracie turned to face him again, trying to control the conflicting emotions coursing through her. "Logan, I don't care about Mr. Whitaker or the contract. I want to know why you lied to me about who *you* were and the fact that you were a slave owner."

His face turned hard. "Who told you that?"

"Does it matter? It's true, isn't it? You owned the Flynn plantation in Maryland."

"Yes." The quiet admission hung between them and her heart sank further. "But I never harmed or mistreated my slaves, Gracie."

"That's doesn't change anything." Then she blurted out the question that had plagued her since they'd left Nebraska. "You knew about me before we… Why did you take my—"

"I didn't take anything," he bit out. "Last I recall, you wanted me as much as I wanted you. Now that it's done, I want to make it right." He reached for her, but she moved back. The muscles in his jaw

flexed, but he didn't grab for her again. "Damn it, Gracie, don't look at me like that. I didn't take advantage of you."

"No, you didn't, but you tricked me into falling—into believing you were an honest man."

"I am." He ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "Or I'm trying to be if you let me."

"How?"

"Marry me."

Gracie stared at him, stunned by the casual declaration. Did he think she could just forgive who he was, or what he'd done? That she could profess before God to willingly become his wife? She had already dishonored all that her family had sacrificed for her by giving herself to him. She wouldn't do it again by legally binding herself to him.

"No."

"Why not?"

Gracie winced at the frustration in his voice. "Because I don't know you."

"You didn't know Whitaker and that didn't stop you."

"That was different. You claim to care about me, but how do I know that? How could I trust you or lie beside you and not think of those you had held in bondage? I could never forgive that myself or you."

His frown was fierce and he cursed. "What do you want from me? To apologize for having slaves? I didn't write the laws, Gracie. Slavery is—*was* a way of life, and I was only sustaining my home and my father's legacy."

She bristled in that moment, taking exception to the irritation in his tone as she tried to quell her own rising anger. "If you're trying to justify your *way of life* to me, Logan, you can save yourself the trouble. Keeping people against their will, telling them how much or how little they can eat, controlling every aspect of their lives is…is repulsive. My father's back was literally torn apart sustaining *your* father's legacy. If that's the *way of life* you were fighting for, then I feel sorry for you because that is *no way to live*."

A weighty silence fell between them. His jaw was like granite, but there was a pallor on his face that was unexpected, and concern almost made her go to him. But instead, she turned her back to him and held her pain at bay.

"I could never marry you, Logan. Now, please just go."

Chapter 10

Damn him.

It had been two weeks now and she had resigned herself to the fact that he had left Montana. Left without saying goodbye.

Gracie shook her head at herself. She knew full well how unreasonably she was behaving, but she was angry nonetheless that he was now gone. For good. And could she blame him? She had all but told him, in so many words, to go to hell. Now that he was gone, she was wasting valuable energy pining for him.

With a small sigh, she carried the empty tankards back to the bar. The crowd was steadily growing at the tavern, and she needed to quickly clear the table and make room for them. She had been lucky to get the job as a barmaid, and especially lucky that Mr. Mercer, her former fiancé's business partner, was part owner. Evidently she had won his respect by making the trip personally to tell his friend she wouldn't marry him, and in turn Mr. Mercer had used his influence to get her work. The pay was shoddy, but she had a room upstairs and Mr. Mercer's influence around the growing town kept the other men from harassing her.

Though she was grateful for the work, she hated working at a tavern. The stench of alcohol and tobacco made her stomach lurch and served as a constant reminder of a past she wanted badly to forget. The tips were also not coming fast enough for her liking, and she was desperate for the money. The sooner she could make more, the sooner she would have enough saved to pay for her passage back to New York.

As the crowd grew, Gracie's movements became more mechanical. Two weeks serving drinks and food had given her a routine that allowed her to move without thinking until she fell in her bed at night from exhaustion. Sometimes she would reread her old letters from home just to keep from thinking of Logan, only to fall into a deep slumber and dream of him.

Suddenly, Gracie felt the unmistakable sensation of someone watching her. She lifted her eyes from the table she was wiping and made eye contact with familiar amber brown ones.

Logan.

His gaze held hers and her stomach fluttered as she stared back at his tired, scruffy face. He sat alone at the far end of the tavern, and she hadn't realized how much she craved to see a familiar face until that moment.

Or how much she had craved to see *him*.

Her heart thudded in her chest, but she took her time making her

way to him. When she finally did, she could see just how weary—and filthy—he was. Not only was his beard overgrown, his hair now curled around his collar, and there were dark smudges on his face.

"What can I get you, sir?" She winced inwardly at her awkwardly formal request.

"Can you sit for a spell?" He took her arm and tugged her down on the seat beside him. "Please."

Gracie sat down, glancing nervously around the tavern before turning back to him.

"You look tired," he said.

A small smile tugged at her lips. "So do you."

He returned her smile though it was just as weary. "I am."

"What are you still doing here? I thought you left for Colorado."

He shook his head. "I've been working. I would have come to see you sooner, but today is my first night off."

"I haven't seen you around," she blurted, revealing to him just how much she had been searching for a glimpse of him. "Where are you working?"

"I work with Whitaker at his mines half of the week and the other half I wrangle cattle."

She frowned. "Why are you working at the mines?" She knew the mines were hard, dangerous work, and she didn't understand why a man with his experience and background would choose to take on such menial labor.

He hesitated before he answered, "I'm working to pay off my debt to him."

"What debt?" No sooner were the words out of her mouth that it dawned on her. "I thought you paid Mr. Whitaker to cancel my contract."

"It wasn't enough."

She shook her head, remembering her last words to him—every harsh word of it. "Logan…about what I said…I didn't mean to guilt you into doing this."

"I put myself in the man's servitude for *you*, Gracie. Not out of guilt or obligation, but because I wanted you to be my wife." He took her hand and held it tight. "I still want you to be my wife."

Her heart lurched at his words, but she glanced away from him. "Nothing's changed, Logan. I'm only here until I can raise enough money to book my passage back to New York."

He squeezed her hand gently. "I want to show you something. Will you come with me?"

Gracie debated it for a moment. It was already hard enough having this brief talk with him now. She didn't think she could be in his company for much longer and not weaken in her resolve. But if

tonight was the last time she would ever get to see him, she wanted to cherish every moment.

"I have another two hours before my shift ends."

"Okay, I'll wait here."

And he did. The sun was barely hanging on before its nightly descent arrived. They walked in silence as Logan brought her to a wide stretch of untended land. She glanced around but couldn't see anything but dirt and overgrown fields.

"Logan? What is it you wanted to show me?"

"This. Yesterday I filled out an application to homestead this land."

"You mean all of this land will be yours?"

He nodded. "Once my contract with Whitaker is over, I'll be free to work the land and build a home and make it *ours*."

Gracie glanced around the empty plot of land. It was a wide stretch of land, but she could easily envision it as prosperous once tended and cared for. With a few animals and even a modest home, they could make this place flourish.

Could she truly have that? A real future—a real *home*—with him?

"Logan…I'm going back home to New York."

"I can't keep you from leaving, Gracie. But I love you and I don't want you to go."

She released a shuddering breath. Once again, she was torn between what her heart wanted and what her mind reasoned. "I…I don't know what to do."

There was warmth in his eyes when he stared down at her. "It was never my intention to lie to you, angel, but neither did I want my past to come between us. All we can do now is make peace with the past and move forward from it."

She stared off into the distance, remembering a similar conversation she'd had with Madeline. Hadn't she also told the young girl to let go of her past and find happiness in her future? Why couldn't she heed the same advice?

"Gracie, we both know that there is a lot of ugliness and darkness in this world. And there are times…" He sighed. "There are times I can't see my way out of it…and feel lost in it. But all the ugliness we've lived through—*will* live through—won't change what I feel for you." He cupped her face. "I love you, Gracie, and I will spend the rest of my days trying to light up some of that darkness. *That* I promise you."

She closed her eyes briefly, her heart swelling at his words. *I sought the Lord, and he answered me… I pray you find happiness…* Her father's prayer and Madeline's words echoed in her head, and Gracie's eyes flung open. She wanted that brighter day. And no matter what

their future had in store, she wanted to be with Logan, to be by his side when it came.

"Will you marry me, Gracie?"

She stared at him searchingly. "It's not going to be easy," she whispered. "People won't accept us."

"No, it won't be, but that doesn't change anything." Tears welled in her eyes and he caught the single tear before it slid down her cheek. "Say you'll marry me."

If this were God's will to bring Logan into her path, into her life, then she would not turn him away a second time. Love only came to few, and true love only came once.

She wouldn't turn her back on love again.

"Yes, I'll marry you."

He flashed her a relieved grin then, as quick as lightning, he snaked his arm around her waist and pulled her into his arms. They held each for what seemed like forever.

"If we hurry," he said close to her ear, "we can catch the reverend before he turns in for the night."

"You want to get married *tonight*?"

Logan kissed the side of her neck, his beard tickling her skin, and she hugged him close.

"Yes, angel. I plan to make love to you *tonight* and I'd like for you to be my wife when I do."

Gracie's face heated, and something light and warm spread inside her. There was something to be said about a man with passion, and her Logan was filled with it. He awoke the same fiery emotions in her that he harbored inside and made her want to demand more out of life.

She didn't know what was in store for their future, but she did know that she had just found love with the unlikeliest of men.

And with Logan she felt beautiful and cherished and simply… amazing.

Epilogue

June 19, 1870

To my dearest Daddy,

I hope this letter finds you well. I'm writing you from our lovely home in Montana. So much has happened since I last wrote you. Just last month, we welcomed a healthy baby girl, Evelynn Grace Finley. We have gotten accustomed to calling her Evie, and now Elias has a little sister to play with.

As you know, Logan has been very good to me and our children. He is a great husband, and father, and we are very much in love. I couldn't be happier. As for the land, we continue to work diligently at it, and in another year, it will be legally ours. I can't wait for that day.

With my teachings at the Negro Academy, I had to take a break due to my condition and the harsh winters but that hasn't stopped me from writing and tutoring some of the young children in the area. I'm also hoping to start a Negro Freedom Day celebration here to rejoice five years of our independence. So far, there has been a great deal of support from the community.

Many black men and women continue to venture west, and I have met so many different people from all walks of life, including friendly Natives, some Mexicans, and even a few Chinamen. Life on the frontier is beautifully rugged and, at times, dangerously so, but I am proud to call it home.

Not a day goes by where I don't think of you and Mama, but I pray every day for your well-being and good health. I'm glad to hear that Junior is growing into a fine young man and I hope life continues to be good to you as it has been for me. I will continue to keep you all in my prayers and hope that you can find some way to come visit me and my growing family.

Logan sends his regards and, as always, I send you all my love. Please write soon.

Your loving daughter,
Gracie M. Finley

Author's Note

Dear reader:

I hope you enjoyed Gracie and Logan's story—a romance inspired by real-life interracial couples, Albert and Lucy Parsons (m. 1871) and George and Lucinda Stevens (m. 1872). The Parsons' and the Stevens' marriages were just one of many that showed, despite racial strife and the discrimination of their time, love is truly color blind.

Amazing Grace was written to pay homage to that kind of audacity for love. Though it was a challenging romance for me to write, it was an important one for me to tell because we must never forget our past but learn to forgive the pains suffered for it. Nothing is more freeing.

All my best,
Lena ♥

Select References:

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- *Prohibition of Interracial Marriage in Utah* by Patrick Q. Mason
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About the Author

Lena Hart is a Florida native currently living in the Harlem edge of New York City. Though she enjoys reading a variety of romance genres, she mainly writes sensual interracial romances with a flare of suspense and mystery. Her first historical romance novelette, *A Sweet Surrender*, was featured in the American Revolutionary anthology, *For Love & Liberty*, and re-released as a standalone. When Lena is not busy writing, she's reading, researching, or conferring with her muse. To learn more about Lena and her work, visit LenaHartSite.com.

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Drifting to You

Kianna Alexander

During the sultry Carolina summer of 1875, baker Rosaline Rhodes boards a Juneteenth cruise down the Cape Fear River. She's there to serve her famous cinnamon spice cake; shipbuilder Will Pruett is there for pleasure. They've denied their mutual attraction for months, but now the river won't be the only thing ebbing and flowing.

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Dedication

In Loving Memory of Clyde Lee Bittle
Beloved Husband, Father, Brother, Uncle and Purveyor of Laughter

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank my anthology co-authors for their insightful critiques of this story. I'd also like to thank my mentor and literary mama Beverly Jenkins for taking the time to research and write a wonderful foreword for this collection.

As always, all my love to my readers who have been following my career and supporting my work, whether you've been with me from the beginning, or have just discovered me. Thank you for giving your time to my work; I'm honored by that.

Rosaline's Cinnamon Spice Cake

3/4 cup dark brown sugar
1/4 cup shortening
1 egg
1 teaspoon vanilla
1/2 cup milk
1 cup flour
1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder
1/4 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons butter, softened
6 tablespoons powdered sugar
2 teaspoons cinnamon
1 teaspoon nutmeg

Preheat oven to 375˚F.

Cream shortening and sugar until light and fluffy. Add 1 egg, beat well. Add vanilla and nutmeg to milk and stir in.

Sift together flour, baking powder and salt. Add to above mixture. Beat until smooth, about 1 minute.

Grease and lightly flour a round 9 inch cake pan or 8 inch square pan.

Spread batter evenly and bake for 20-25 minutes or until tooth pick inserted in center comes out clean.

Remove from oven and spread immediately with butter. Sift powdered sugar and cinnamon over cake. Serve warm.

Drifting to You

June, 1875
Fayetteville, NC

Rosaline Rhodes pulled her aging buggy into an empty space along Hay Street and set the handbrake. The soft pink of dawn still hung overhead, heralding the rising sun. It was Friday morning, the eighteenth of June and today she would tackle the biggest job she'd ever been assigned.

She climbed down from the buggy, planting her feet on the firm surface of the cobbled road and circling around the rear of the wagon to the plank walk. As she strolled toward the Market House, which was just opening for the day, she silently listed the things she needed for today's task: five pounds of flour, two pounds of sugar, and several sticks of cinnamon bark.

During the dark days of slavery, Rosaline had been owned by the Widow Phoebe Rhodes, an old pillar of county society. She'd served as cook on the Rhodes spread since the tender age of twelve, and had demonstrated a special talent for baking. Since the day she and the other captives at the plantation were freed, she'd set her efforts on honing and improving that talent. Now, nearly a decade later, her sweet treats were in high demand in Fayetteville and many of the surrounding townships.

She eased up the walk until she approached the gatekeeper, who busied himself swinging open the heavy iron gates that secured the Market House when closed. Offering a nod to her, the guard set the gates in their open position and stepped aside so she could enter.

The structure had two stories. The lower floor was an open air pavilion, while the upper floor was enclosed. She never been up the stairs to the upper floor, and hadn't any idea what was up there. She had, on occasion, seen council members and other people of high position coming and going from the upstairs.

Inside on the lower floor, numerous vendors had set up stands to ply their wares. Most were selling produce and dry goods, but some sold artisan items, like beaded jewelry and hand woven rugs. The number of vendors varied from day to day. At present there were about ten stands open for business.

A brief glance around the interior of the old Market House brought back a flood of memories. Back in '65, only a few months before the war's bitter end, she'd seen many of her friends from a neighboring plantation sold off in this very market, so their master could settle his mounting debts. She shuddered at the chill that rolled

down her spine at the memory of that day. As time had passed, general stores had come to town, allowing her the opportunity to bypass the Market House if she chose. But she was serious about her craft as a baker, and the cinnamon bark she purchased at this market was the freshest and most potent to be had between here and Wilmington. So she would endure the awful memories long enough to purchase them and be on her way.

Seeing the woman she sought, she approached her spice stand with a smile on her face. “Good morning, Mrs. Grundy.”

The round faced, rosy cheeked older woman greeted her with a smile of her own. “Aye, that it is, Rosaline. Come for some cinnamon I suppose?”

She nodded. “Five sticks, if you can spare it.”

“That I can.” Mrs. Grundy gathered the sticks from the cracker box she kept them in, and placed them in a small burlap sack, then handed them over to her.

Rosaline accepted the small bounty and paid the half eagle price. She touched the brim of her straw hat, and started to stroll away.

Mrs. Grundy stayed her by offering a small vial. “Here, my dear. A vial of my best nutmeg, for my best customer.”

Rosaline reached for her hand bag, but Mrs. Grundy shook her head.

“Take it. No charge.”

Her smile brightened. “Why, thank you Mrs. Grundy. Good day to you.”

“And a good day to you, Rosaline.”

She turned, tucked the vial into the sack with the cinnamon, and departed. Passing beneath the center arch of the Market House, she wound up back on the plank walk. As she moved up the road toward McKeithan’s General Store for the rest of her items, the gears of her mind ticked through all the steps she’d need to take to prepare the massive, five-tiered spice cake Marian Goodman had commissioned for tomorrow’s Juneteenth festivities. Usually a cake of such caliber would have been made ahead, but Mrs. Goodman insisted on the utmost in freshness.

Her gaze settled low, landing on the planks beneath her feet as she walked and plotted. She saw only the feet of her fellow citizens as they went by her.

That is, until she walked smack into the solid chest of a man who’d been traveling the same path as her, only in the opposite direction.

“Heavens, I’m terribly sorry...” Her words trailed off, her nostrils flared as the familiar scents of fresh cut wood and linseed oil touched her senses. Immediately she knew him. A smile lifted the corners of

her mouth as she tilted her head upward toward the tall, dark obstacle in her path.

Finally she met the mirthful, dark eyes of William Pruett. His full brow arched, the twitch of his lips conveying his amusement. “You’d best be looking where you’re going, Rosie.”

Heat filled her face as she tried to get her wits about her. Will, as he preferred to be called, had never been one to mince words. Still, he was a good natured fellow, and as handsome as a man had any right to be. “Pardon me, Will. I’ve a few items to pick up for my spice cake, and I’m in a bit of a rush.”

He chuckled. “I can tell. It you weren’t such a mousy little thing you’d have bowled me over.”

She knew he was teasing her, both about her short stature and her clumsiness. “Be gone with you, Will Pruett. Haven’t you some got final adjustments to make to the ship before we sail tomorrow morning?”

His gaze shifted behind her for a moment before he grasped her shoulders and shifted her body to the right, out of the flow of foot traffic. A gaggle of folks passed by, chatting and laughing. After they’d gone, he leaned his shoulder against the brick outer wall of the small building housing the town library. “True enough, I do. I’ll be doing my final checks on Hope’s Lantern today, to make sure she’s in top sailing shape.”

“Well, go see to it. And make sure she’s set for smooth sailing as well. I don’t want my spice cake overturned into the Cape Fear because she rides like a mine cart.”

He whistled. “Aren’t you full of sass today? Don’t worry. The Lantern will be right as rain, and I’ll be sure to let my Captain know of your demands for a smooth journey.”

Watching the words drip from his full, mustached lips threatened to derail all the carefully laid plans she had for the day. Will Pruett was temptation personified; tall, strapping, and muscular, with skin the color of browned wheat and black wavy hair that grazed his chin. His eyes were mesmerizing orbs of brown flecked with hints of gold. They often met during her excursions into town for supplies, and she enjoyed chatting with him due to his jovial nature. He seemed interested in her beyond friendship, but her good sense told her that a man like him could undo everything she’d worked so hard to build. She shook herself free from his spell as best she could, offering a curt nod. “I really must go, Will. I’ve got to get home and get the cake started. It’s going to be very large.”

He gave her a slow nod, touching his middle and forefingers to his temple in a sort of salute. “Then I’ll see you tomorrow at the river’s edge, Rosie.”

He turned and moved on, and she did the same, traveling in the opposite direction of him. She wanted to keep walking, to keep her focus on the important job she'd been entrusted with.

Instead, her traitorous body won out, and she turned her head just a bit to get a look at Will as he walked away.

The cut of his broadcloth vest barely touched his lower back, and her eyes fell to the tight lines of his rear end, encased in a pair of well-fitting denim trousers.

Her breath caught, and she abruptly turned around, hurrying toward McKeithan's.

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Will stretched his arms above his head, stifling a yawn. The lunch hour was behind him, and now the afternoon doldrums were beginning to settle. He set his hammer down on the sawhorse next to him, and went inside the office to seek out a cup of coffee.

Inside the small cabin, he got himself a tin mug of the tepid brew leftover from lunch and stood by the front window with it. Before him lay his shipyard, ten acres of loose, sandy soil dotted with grass and wild blooms. Beyond the borders of the yard, to the north and west, lay a longleaf pine forest. To the south and east lay the waters of the Cape Fear River, flowing toward the Atlantic.

As a slave born on the Pruett plantation, he'd worked at this yard from his boyhood. Old Man Pruett and his wife Celine had owned the yard, which provided the light, well-built ships needed to navigate the fickle waters of the Cape Fear. The river was a moody and unyielding mistress; her jagged bottom and rough borders meant the passage narrowed and widened at strange intervals. The water's depth also varied wildly from place to place, hence the four locks installed along the river between Fayetteville and Wilmington. The skill and knowledge of the crew at Cape Fear Shipworks had made it one of the most successful businesses in the city.

But that was prior to Mr. Lincoln's war. Most of the men who worked to build the ships went off to fight for one side or the other. Many of the slaves left, either escaping in the chaos or signing on with the Union army. By the time Sherman had marched through in March of '65, burning most of Fayetteville in the process, only five male captives remained. Every white man who'd worked at the yard had either been killed, maimed, or captured in the conflict.

When word of emancipation reached the area, the remaining slaves packed their meager belongings. But before Will could join the others on the journey north, Old Man Pruett had stopped him.

The Pruett plantation, on the northern edge of the city, had been burned and looted by Sherman's men. The old blue eyes of his master had been tired and watery as he handed over a piece of rolled paper.
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“Here you go, Will. Have your own way with the place.” Then he’d gotten on his buggy with Mrs. Pruett and drove away, not looking back.

When Will unrolled the paper, he found the deed to the shipyard. That had been ten years ago, but he often thought of that day. He’d never seen or heard from his old master again, and parts of him wondered what had become of the Pruetts. He supposed they’d join the throngs of displaced Southerners moving north to rebuild their lives after the war ravaged their homes. He might never know their fate, so instead he focused on building the best quality ships this side of the Appalachians.

He could see his friend and business associate, Bret Longstreet, lying on his back beneath the hull of Hope’s Lantern. The ship, built at this yard, belonged to the Goodmans, one of the wealthiest black families in the area. The Lantern had only just been built this past spring, and the Juneteenth cruise Mrs. Goodman had suggested would represent its maiden voyage down the river. As such, Will, Bret, and a crew of hands had been working all day to ensure the Lantern was ready to sail.

The ship was set up on large blocks of wood in the central area of the yard, with ten or so men swarming around it like bees near a hive. Marian Goodman, matriarch of a wealthy, freeborn family, had come to him with very specific standards for the building of what she referred to as the family’s “pleasure boat.” The vessel was to serve no other purpose than ferrying the Goodmans and their friends up and down the Cape Fear River, to and from the spot where they kept a beach cottage near Wilmington. She’d also secured a number of furnishings and decorative pieces for the finished ship, and as soon as the mechanical checks were completed, the men at the shipyard would begin moving those items onto the vessel, setting it up for the celebratory maiden voyage.

When he’d downed the last of his cool coffee, he set the mug aside and went out to check on the progress of things. In less than two hours it would be closing time, and he was looking forward to finishing the preparations for the voyage so he could go home and put his feet up. He squatted beside Bret, who remained on his back beneath the ship’s hull. The sounds coming from where his friend worked revealed that he was using a hammer and chisel.

“How does she look, Bret?”

Bret slid a bit along the sandy, grass speckled ground, until his face was revealed. “Now that I’ve chipped away the last bit of excess wood so she can navigate through the locks and over the sandbars, she’s as yar as they come, Will.”

He clapped his hands together. “Excellent. How long before we

can move the trappings on board?"

Bret gave him a crooked smile. "We can start as soon as you help me up off the ground."

With a chuckle, Will offered his hand. Bret grasped it and allowed himself to be pulled up onto his feet.

Dusting the grains of sand and blades of grass from his denims and brown work shirt, Bret winked. "Much obliged. Now let's move that cargo."

Will whistled to the rest of the workmen. "Alright, boys. Let's outfit her!"

All the men ceased their conversations and tasks to move to the barn-like structure where lumber and supplies were normally housed. Now, however, the place was half-filled with the fancy furniture, paintings, and other items Mrs. Goodman had sent to outfit the Lantern.

As they usually did when loading a ship in dry dock, two men made sure the gangplank was securely anchored in the sandy soil. Will and Bret then boarded the ship, preparing to accept the items as they were handed up. Once the signal was given, the men began to use wheelbarrows and brute strength to get the goods aboard. First came the Oriental rugs that were to be placed on the floor of the deck. Larger items that needed several sets of hands, such as the Louis XIV settee and accompanying tables, were carefully walked over and passed up the plank, followed by the smaller items.

While moving the items into place inside the ship's parlor, Will and Bret conversed to make the task less dull.

"So, did you run into your lady at the market today?" Bret's teasing tone accompanied the question.

Will cut him a look, but answered anyway. "She's not my lady, but yes, I did run into her today. Or rather, she ran into me." He then gave a brief recounting of the distracted lady baker walking smack into his chest.

Bret laughed as he helped slide the settee into its designated spot. "She something, alright. And she's more your lady than any other. After all, you've been talking to her for months now."

"Nonsense. Talking to someone, even over a period of time, doesn't make a relationship." He pushed the console table against one wall of the ship's parlor and secured it to the wall with a set of anchoring brackets. The brackets would allow the heavier furniture and the rugs to remain in place in case the waters became choppy.

"Whatever you say. We all know you like her, Will."

Will turned his back on his meddling friend, long enough to retrieve a heavy vase from Clem, one of the shipyard hands.

Clem winked as he handed over the vase. "Don't worry, boss man.

Once she's on board the ship tomorrow, there'll be no escaping all your many charms."

Taking the vase, Will rolled his eyes. "You men are worse than a bunch of gossiping women."

They continued loading the ship until everything was in place. Standing back to admire it, Will had to admit that it was a finely appointed parlor. After he and Bret exited the ship, they took a final look at it. Hope's Lantern had been built from the best quality oak to be found in these parts. According to her purpose, she'd been kept lightweight, with the only metal used on the vessel being fittings, nails and screws. She was a longer, narrower version of the riverboats trawling the Mississippi, a necessity for navigating the unpredictable waters and the series of locks found on the Cape Fear. Her rim, and the edges of the paddle boat wheel, had been trimmed with a broad stripe of blue paint; blue being Mr. Goodman's favorite color. She was a showpiece first and foremost, and that's how she appeared now sitting up on the risers, varnished and polished until her hull and fittings shone in the sunlight.

She's a beauty. Will felt a swelling of pride in his chest at the sight. This vessel was easily one of the larger, more complex ones built under his command of the shipyard, and he was pleased with the way it had turned out. All that remained was to get it in the drink tomorrow, and see if she sailed as good as she looked.

"Good job men. I'll expect those of you on the crew for the voyage to be here by sunrise tomorrow." Will's words echoed around the yard.

Once everything was put in its proper place for the night, Will said his goodbyes to the men he worked with, and climbed onto his buggy for the ride home. He drove a compact conveyance, drawn by a mule. It wasn't fancy or new, but for a single man like himself, it served its purpose well.

As he drove down the cobbled streets to the eastern edges of town, he took in the near silence and solitude. It was well past the seven o'clock hour, and most of the shops in town had long since closed for the day. By now, folks were home with their families, having supper and preparing for bed.

Just outside the borders of town, he reached his home. It was a small lot, just under two acres, on which he'd built a small cabin. He'd stayed in the remains of the big house at the old Pruett spread after the master and missus left, but only long enough for this place to be completed.

He halted his buggy next to the cabin and set the handbrake, then took his mule Hiram around to the small barn. Once the animal was watered, fed, and secured for the night, Will entered the cabin

through the back door.

In the darkness, he fumbled a bit for the matches he kept on his kitchen table. Once he had his hand on them, he struck one, and lit the lamp on the tabletop. He adjusted the flame, turning it up as high as it would go.

The illumination cast by the lamp reached into his small parlor.

And there, just where the circle of light began to fade into darkness again, he saw Starla Gates.

It appeared as if she were sitting on his settee smiling at him, her eyes dancing with merriment.

He shook his head, knowing it could not be so, but she remained.

Starla had been dead nearly eleven years. Logic told him that she was gone from him forever, and would never know of his love. Yet his heart refused to believe it, even after all this time.

He blinked a few times, until the vision left him.

Alone in his cabin, he trudged toward the welcome embrace of his bed.

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Evening shadows shrouded the interior of Rosaline's cabin, so she went round the one room structure, turning up all the lamps she had scattered about. She covered a yawn with her hand, then used her handkerchief to blot her damp brow. Having both her ovens lit all day to get the cakes baked had left the interior of the cabin extremely hot. While she was up, she used two heavy stones to prop open the front and rear doors, in hope of letting some of the stifling heat escape.

She looked at the small crates sitting on her kitchen table, with the cooled, paper wrapped layers of spice cake resting in side. It had taken her all day, but she'd finally finished the mammoth confection. Now all that remained was assembling it. She and her assistant Sarah would put it together once it was safely on board the ship.

She took a quick trip to the pump to wash the flour dust from her hands and body, then returned inside to find the temperature in the cabin had cooled a bit. The rising heat of June gave way to cooler temperatures at night, and the breeze blowing through the cabin was a welcome respite from the heat generated by her ovens.

Once she'd changed into her night gown, she fixed herself a sandwich with a few leftover slices of roast turkey from the icebox, and a cup of lemonade. Sitting down to her supper, she savored the food, as well as the joy of having finally completed her largest bakery order to date.

She'd taken her time to craft what she thought was an exquisite cake. Now she only hoped the Goodmans and their well-heeled guests would agree. As things now stood, she baked her cupcakes, cookies, and her signature sweet potato turnovers in large batches, then sold
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them in town. Since she'd not yet saved enough funds to purchase a storefront, she did all her baking at home and made her sales out of the back of her wagon. Marian Goodman's order of the elaborate spice cake had earned her a nice profit, and she did as she always did with the money. She'd pocketed only what she needed for supplies and basic living expenses, and deposited the rest in her account at Fayetteville Colored Bank and Trust. With few hundred more dollars, she would finally be able to afford the storefront she so desperately wanted, and take her bakery business to the next level.

She thought back on her days as a youth, when she'd spent her every waking moment catering to the needs of her mistress. Her days had been an exhausting blur of cooking, washing dishes, and serving Mrs. Rhodes and her salty old acquaintances. Late night demands for cookies and tea had roused her from sleep many a night.

The last decade of freedom had been the best time of her life. Yes, she'd worked hard, some days almost as hard as she had for the Widow Rhodes. But at least now, she benefited from her labor. No matter how tired she was at the end of the day, knowing that her life was her own made all her toil worth the effort. To her mind, Juneteenth was the most important holiday of the year, and one to be celebrated in grand fashion. After all, without one's freedom, the other holidays seemed rather silly and pointless.

Draining the last sip of lemonade, she stood and stretched, going to seek her bed. Tomorrow would be a busy day, and she needed the rest so she could have her wits about her. Securing her doors with the bolt, but leaving the windows open to allow the breeze in, she crawled in the one luxury she owned- her feather mattress topped bed.

She settled beneath the covers, her heavy eyelids dipping closed.

She pried them open to the surrounding darkness for a moment before they fell closed again.

When she opened her eyes the second time, she gasped.

The lamp on her dressing table was lit, casting a glow on the space near the foot of her bed. She felt a bit strange; out of sorts. *I doused all the lamps…didn't I?*

Another sight grabbed her attention, one much more attractive than the soft glow of the lamp.

There, in the flickering light, stood Will.

He was shirtless, revealing the muscled expanse of his chest and powerful arms. His dark locks hung loose, framing the handsome, angular face. His eyes were on her, and the heat in his gaze was so potent, it threatened to singe her nightgown.

Her mouth hung aloft, her throat parched and dry. She wanted to speak, wanted to ask him why he was in her private space.

But before she could speak, his large hands went to the leather

belt circling the waist of his denims.

Her words were swallowed as she gulped.

He said nothing. A sensual smile lifted the corners of his mustached mouth.

She could not look away from him, not if her very life depended on it. Her full and undivided attention belonged to him.

His eyes never left hers as he loosened the belt, removed and discarded it.

Her mouth was no longer dry; now, it watered.

Glory. If ever the good Lord made a man finer than this one, she didn't want to meet him; she didn't think she could bear to look at him.

His fingers worked open the placard of his pants, then slowly began to slip the pants down over the hard lines of his hips.

Inch by inch, he revealed his bronzed skin to her.

Her eyes landed squarely at the center of him, to the place where his hard thighs met his rippled torso. She could see the bulge there, it was impossible to miss. Warmth pooled in her core, her desire for him smoldering and burning like a fire in her belly.

He worked the pants lower on his hips, then slid his hand around to his front.

His deep voice filled the room. "Is this what you want to see, Rosie?"

Entranced, she managed a single affirmative bob of her head.

He reached inside, as if to free himself from the confining fabric.

Her heart pounded in her ears, hot blood racing through her veins.

Her vision swam, and she shut her eyes against the blurry images.

Her eyes popped open again, and this time, she was met with only the darkness shrouding her cabin and the sounds of her own heavy, panting breaths.

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The mid-morning sun shone hot and bright over the launch point on the river, just a few miles from the center of town. Will and his men stood on the shore near the gangplank, greeting the passengers as they boarded the Lantern, as she sat docked at the river's edge.

In his best shirt, tie, and broadcloth slacks, Will smiled and shook hands with the folks approaching the ship, then introduced them to Bret, who would captain the vessel on its maiden voyage.

In a lull between passengers, Bret elbowed him. "Looks like a good crowd today, Will."

He had to agree, so he nodded. "And a beautiful day for sailing. Let's hope the river is as hospitable as the weather."

"Aye." Bret straightened his tie, adjusted the tilt of his blue and
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gold captain's hat atop his ruddy blond hair.

He recalled last night's moment of weakness. Bret, being his closest friend, knew of the nocturnal visits often paid to him by the specter of the woman he once loved. He'd lacked the courage to approach her back then, and now she'd been gone from the world for more than a decade. He decided not to mention it, in favor of keeping the mood light for today's festivities.

Not telling Starla of his love had been a foolish mistake, one he dearly regretted. He would not make the error again. Before the ship docked in Wilmington, he meant to reveal his feelings to Rosaline.

He let his eyes scan the few folks milling about on shore. Most were faces he recognized but didn't know by name. He often encountered the Goodman's wealthy friends in town, but rarely spoke to any of them. Perhaps today he would get a chance to know them. For now, all he knew was that they represented the top tier of colored society in Cumberland County.

The string trio, undoubtedly invited by Mrs. Goodman, boarded the ship with their instruments. Once they were safely on the deck, Will returned to watching the people on shore.

His eyes drifted to a wagon parked on the flat land beneath an old oak, just as the female driver and her companion began to unload some crates from the back. When the shorter of the two women turned around, he saw that it was Rosaline.

Bret saw her too, and remarked, "Ah. There's the little filly who's won your favor."

Ignoring his friend, he watched the graceful, small steps Rosaline took, cradling two small crates in her arms. She wore a summer weight blouse, snow white in color and accented in lace around her wrists and the hollow of her throat. The tan skirt had a ribbon tied about the waist and fell nearly to the ground, revealing just the tips of her slipper clad feet. Atop her short curls, she wore a straw bonnet hat, adorned with an array of pink and white blooms and tied beneath her chin with a wide strip of sheer fabric. The elaborate hat added a good half a foot to her small stature.

He'd never seen her dressed this way, though he could tell it was her Sunday best. To his eyes, she was the most beautiful woman present. However, he would make sure to keep that thought to himself until the opportunity to tell her presented itself. If Marian Goodman got wind of it, she'd throw a fit.

Finally Rosaline reached the gangplank, with the young girl close behind her. She offered a shy smile. "Good morning, Will. Captain, it's lovely to see you."

Bret tipped his hat to her.

Will placed a hand on her arm. "Good morning, Rosie. Could you

use some assistance with your crates?"

She nodded. "We could, thank you. Sarah and I were about to make a second trip to the wagon for the rest of them."

"Nonsense." Will beckoned for two of the crewmen, and dispatched them to the wagon to gather the rest of Rosaline's crates.

When they returned, Will softly grasped Rosaline's arm. "Allow me to assist you up, my dear." He helped her mount the gangplank and climb it. Once she was safely up, he released her and stepped back down.

Her eyes caught his for a moment as she softly uttered her thanks. Then she, the youngster, and the crewmen crossed the deck and disappeared inside the ship's parlor.

Will's eyes followed her movements until she was out of sight. When he looked away, he saw his friend smirking at him. "What's so funny now, Bret?"

Bret elbowed him again. "Boy, Will. She's got you at sixes and sevens."

He raised his hand to give Bret a quick swat against his head, but quickly put it down when he saw The Goodmans approaching. Fashionably late as always, the impeccably dressed older couple were slowly making their way to the gangplank. He straightened up and smiled, silently urging Bret to follow suit as he awaited them.

Mr. Goodman stepped up, offering each of them a hearty handshake. Then, he grasped the lapels of his fancy soft brown suit, which looked much too hot for a summer day on the river. "Morning, you two. You've done a marvelous job on the ship, Will. She's a beauty if ever I saw one." Hearing his wife clear her throat, he quickly added, "Almost as lovely as my Marian."

A smile touched the lips of the old matriarch, dressed in a yellow silk gown that bared her arms and shoulders. "Why your sweet words flatter me, darling. Good morning, Will, Bret. I agree with my Chauncey. The Hope's Lantern is a work of art, truly befitting my late grandmother's name."

Will clasped her hand. "Thank you, Mrs. Goodman. That's high praise, indeed."

She continued on, in the chatty way she was known for. "Did I ever tell you how I came up with the name for the ship, boys?"

Both Will and Bret shook their heads.

"While my family has always been free, my grandmother's home on the Virginia/ Pennsylvania border was a station on the Road. According to the stories she told me as a girl, she left a lit lantern hanging near the trail if it was safe to stop there. Any captive in the area seeking a safe place for the night would look for 'Hope's Lantern.'"

Will took in the tale, noting how proud Mrs. Goodman seemed to be of her family's involvement in helping slaves escape. He found that interesting, since he knew her own attitude about former slaves seemed to swing between pity and disdain.

Her face brightened as she completed the telling. The flirtatious smile, and her attention, were quite obviously directed at Bret.

Bret squirmed under her gaze, looking as nervous as rabbit in a snare.

Will held back a chuckle. "I'm so glad you're pleased, Mr. and Mrs. Goodman. Welcome aboard, and do find me or one of my men if you should require anything during the voyage."

Marian nodded her understanding, her eyes still focused on Bret. "I'll be sure to do that."

Chauncey's brow furrowed, and he grasped his wife's arm. "Come now dear, let's get on board so we can get underway."

With that said, he led his wife up the gangplank and onto the ship's deck.

This time Will elbowed Bret. "Looks like Mrs. Goodman's got her eye on you. She was looking at you the way hungry dog looks at a steak."

Bret shuddered. "Stifle, Will. She's married and old enough to be my mother."

He smiled, amused by the horrified look on his friend's face. "You know I'm only teasing. Now let's get on board and get this thing down the river."

"Yes, lets. And be sure and tell Marian I'm not allowed to leave my post at the helm." Bret scurried up the plank.

Will followed, chuckling.

Once they'd made sure everyone was on board, and that all the provisions were in order, Will ordered the plank pulled up and the anchor raised. Then, using the long oars dedicated for that purpose, the crewmen pushed off from the shore, to the sounds of cheering from the passengers on board.

With the vessel underway, the paddle wheel churning and pushing it downstream, Will moved into the parlor area. He spent a few moments making sure everyone was comfortable, then searched the room for Rosaline. When he saw her, standing near the table where her cake was displayed, he excused himself.

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Rosaline busied herself securing the top tier of her cinnamon spice cake. The cake, five tiers tall and well exceeding her own height when combined with the table height, was placed inside a protective wooden structure she'd had created just for that purpose. Dusting her hands a bit, she stepped down from the overturned crate that had
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been supplementing her height so she could reach the top. She stood back a bit to admire the tall, frosted beauty of her confection, when young Sarah tapped her on the shoulder.

"Yes, Sarah, what is it?"

Jabbing her finger in the air, the girl said, "It's Mr. Pruett. He's headed right for us."

She let her eyes move to where Sarah pointed. Sure enough, she saw the tall, handsome fellow striding toward her. She corrected her posture, adjusted her hat, and put on her best smile.

He stepped into her space wearing a smile of his own. "Hello again, Rosie. I see you got your cake together. It's mighty impressive."

She could feel the blush rising into her cheeks. No one else in town ever called her that nickname. Coming from his lips, it held a special, odd sort of appeal. "Thank you, Will. It was a lot of work but it turned out nicely, I think."

He gestured to the wooden crate surrounding the cake. "So, what's this contraption?"

"Oh, it's a cake box. I had a friend of mine who's a carpenter make it up for me, just for this voyage. Basically, it's made to fit around my cake platter, with very little extra space. This little hinge here operates a door, which I can open and close to serve the cake, and the contraption keeps my cake level in case the ride should become a bit bumpy."

He grasped the brass handle then opened and closed the door. "How clever. I've never seen anything like it. Who came up with this idea?"

"Why, I did."

"Ah. Beauty and intelligence. You're a treasure indeed, Rosie." And before she could say another word, he picked up her hand and brought it to his lips. Placing a brief kiss against the back of it, he then released it. With a smile and bow, he moved away until he faded back into the crowd of party-goers.

Her skin tingled from the contact, and as she tried to gather her scattered focus, she heard Sarah giggling. She turned to her young assistant with a censuring look. At fifteen, Sarah was still young enough to believe in the romantic tales she read in cheap novels. But at twenty-seven, Rosaline knew better. Love and life were far from the fantasy those books portrayed. Here in reality, things were much more complex.

"He's so dashing." Sarah's brown eyes took on a dreamy look as she spoke the words.

"That he is." There was no sense in denying that truth.

"You should court him. He likes you."

Rosaline chuckled. "It's not that simple, Sarah dear."

Her eyes went wide with confusion. “Why not?”

She sighed. Her doe eyed assistant was the picture of naivete. The girl was young, too young to know some of the horrors of bondage. Sarah had lived more of her life free than she had in captivity. How could she understand the soul crushing shame of being forced to breed, over and over, like a piece of cattle? The memories of those days were still fresh, and still stung like the lash.

Sarah’s expression changed, and she tensed as if sensing the pain rising in Rosaline. “I’m sorry, Miss Rosaline. Mama says sometimes I get carried away, and say things I shouldn’t. Forgive me.”

Taking a deep breath to fend off the emotions, Rosaline patted the girl’s shoulder. “It’s alright, Sarah. We’re done working for now, why don’t you run along and enjoy the ship for a bit.”

With a nod, the young apprentice baker moved away, melting into the group of people positioned around the ship’s parlor.

Left there, she wrestled with the painful memories resurfacing in her mind. When she’d been just a girl of thirteen, the night visits had begun. Her mistress, Pheobe Rhodes, had insisted she was old enough to breed, and sent bucks to the shack she shared with two other girls the same age. That first night, the man who took her innocence had looked stricken; even expressed regret, but he’d been given an order to carry out, so the deed was done anyhow.

The other girls soon got the large bellies the mistress had hoped for, but Rosaline did not.

Night after night, for seventeen long days, she’d been forced to couple with full grown men who were easily twice her size. But her courses came anyway, with the flow as heavy and painful as she’d always endured. When she still didn’t get with child, the old woman who acted as a doctor of sorts to the slaves had declared her womb barren. The night visits had ceased after that, but Rosaline knew she would never forget those hellish nights.

She dashed the tears springing to her eyes, not wanting to draw attention to herself. Her past was tragic, but she was not alone in that. She imagined scores of other women in bondage had been treated the same way. Now it was over, and there was nothing to be done about it.

So she inhaled deeply, then blew the air out, and directed her eyes back toward the cake. It had turned out beautifully, and she hoped Mrs. Goodman would agree when the time came to slice it and distribute it to the revelers on board the ship. This particular cinnamon spice cake could be the most important one she’d ever made. If the Goodmans were pleased with it, and word got around to their wealthy free-born friends, she could sell enough baked goods to finally move her bakery into the vacant storefront she’d been eyeing.

She checked the door on her cake contraption to be sure it was securely latched, then made her way across the room. She stepped out onto the deck, and the summer breeze threatened to lift the hat from her head. She steadied it with a hand and moved to the rail.

It was a beautiful blue sky day, and the wispy white clouds did little to filter the bright sunlight. She looked down at the frothy surface of the river, being churned by the ship's steam engine and paddle wheel as it sailed toward Wilmington. Towering pines and spruces along the bank scented the air with their sap, and she inhaled the rich fragrance. She leaned against the rail and closed her eyes, tilting her face up toward the warmth of the sun. A sense of contentment washed over her, and in that moment, she felt a silent assurance that things were just as they should be.

Her life was busy, and allowed little time for leisure; moments like this were a precious rarity. Even thought she'd lived her entire life in Fayetteville, this was her first voyage down the Cape Fear. She was here in a work capacity, yes, but then her duties were completed, she planned to enjoy the festivities and the scenery to the fullest.

The soft breeze changed direction, and as she inhaled again, she picked up a scent.

Fresh cut wood, and maleness.

Without opening her eyes, she knew who was there.

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Will stopped at the railing, next to where Rosaline stood with her eyes closed and her face lifted up toward the sunlight. He leaned his body against the railing and watched her for a moment, not wanting to interrupt whatever private thoughts she might be entertaining.

She took a breath, opened her eyes and directed her gaze at him. A slight smile touched the corners of her mouth before the soft pink lips parted to speak. "Hello again, Will."

He smiled. "Rosaline."

She turned her gaze away from him, as if looking out over the water.

From this side of the deck, they had a good view of the river traffic moving alongside them, headed in the opposite direction. He wasn't surprised, since the Cape Fear was the most important river in the entire state for commercial transport. Just about anything that needed to be transported inland from the port of Wilmington would be loaded on a steamer or a towboat and hauled up the river to Elizabethtown, Fayetteville, Averasboro, or one of the other landing points along the winding waterway. From there the goods would travel by land to final destinations all over the North Carolina.

The healthy maritime shipping industry on the Cape Fear was the main reason behind the success of Cape Fear Shipworks. Aside from
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the building of new vessels, Will and his crew also completed repairs of older vessels and provided assistance to any vessel passing through Fayetteville that might meet with trouble, such as running aground on the jagged shoreline, or mechanical failure.

They also often assisted ships in the case of a malfunction of Lock #3, which was just a few miles downriver from the shipyard. It was the last of the three locks located on the river route between Wilmington and Fayetteville, and any vessel hoping to get further inland had to navigate through it. The fickle and ever-changing nature of the water levels in the river necessitated the installation of the locks; Lock #3 seemed to be one of the busiest. The device was meant to raise and lower the water level as needed to allow the passage of ships traveling in either direction, but occasionally it didn't work as it should. A malfunctioning lock could force river traffic to back up for miles.

He chuckled to himself, thinking of the things he'd seen over the years he'd worked on this waterway. The Cape Fear was harsh mistress, confounding and outsmarting captains as every bend. The river was rife with opportunity for disaster, but the location and expansive nature of the waterway meant that boats needed to use it anyhow.

At this moment, a small steamboat chugged along near the Lantern, headed east. He recognized it as a cargo ship, one he was familiar with.

He read the name of the vessel, painted in black letters on the bough. "The Regal Lady."

Rosaline eyed the vessel curiously. "You've seen that ship before, I gather?"

"I have. She's owned by a man named Richards, who sends cargo upriver to Averasboro about once a week. We've made repairs to that vessel, and once we helped the crew get her off a sandbar." Already, the thick, acrid scent of the boat's load permeated the air.

She wrinkled her nose. "Heavens, what business is this Richards in? Whatever he's shipping smells awful."

He chuckled, but could see why the cargo on the Regal Lady might offend her nose. "I don't know what Mr. Richards' line of business is, but his ship hauls barrels of raw turpentine, pine pitch, and tar."

She fanned her hand in front of her nose. "I don't know how the crew stands the stench."

He shrugged. "After a while, they become accustomed to it, I suppose."

As the Regal Lady passed them, the captain threw up his hand in greeting.

Will returned the gesture, and next to him, Rosaline waved her handkerchief at the passing vessel.

He let his gaze rake over her body, being as discreet as he could manage. She was a beauty in every sense. Her lithe, shapely figure could not be disguised, even by her demure clothing. She had full lips, a proud nose, and perfectly coiffed dark hair. And the sherry colored eyes, framed by a thick fringe of black lashes, were the most beautiful he'd ever seen.

As if she sensed his attentions, she turned his way. "Is there something I can do for you, Will?"

He knew what he must ask of her. While he had her here, aboard the boat he'd designed and built, he need to ask her the question that had been plaguing him for weeks. He stepped closer to her, entering her personal space. If she was surprised by the move, she didn't let on. "Yes, there is. You can let me court you."

She blinked several times. "My, Will. Your words are very bold."

"Are they? There is something between us, Rosie. A spark, an attraction. Call it what you will, but you feel it just as I do."

She lowered her gaze, and redness touched her cheeks. "Will, I...I don't know what to say."

He reached for her hand, clasped it in both of his own. "Say yes, Rosie."

Her hand trembled inside his as she looked at him. "I can't. Not now."

He held her gaze, saw the sadness behind her beautiful eyes. Was there some darkness dwelling within her, something about her he didn't know? "Why not?"

She closed her eyes for a moment, took a slow, deep breath. When she reopened them, she spoke again. "I can't speak of it. All I ask is that you give me until we dock in Wilmington to make my decision."

Still holding her hand, he nodded. He'd waited nearly a year since he realized she'd taken his heart, to ask her to be his. Surely he could last the next few hours. "As you wish."

She gave a soft smile, but this one held traces of some unspoken pain. "Thank you for understanding, Will." She eased her hand from his grasp, turned, and slipped away from him.

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Rosaline wove her way through the tangle of people on the deck, headed toward the parlor door.

Speaking with Will had brought back memories of the erotic dream she'd had the night before. He'd probably noticed the blush creeping into her cheeks, but thankfully, he could not have known the reason she blushed. She couldn't recall ever having had such a hot,
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potent dream about a man. Even now she could clearly recall the rippled muscles of his bare chest, illuminated by the soft glow of her lamp. She'd wanted him, wanted him to kiss her, to touch her, and to show her what coupling could be when consent and mutual respect guided the act. Her desire for him had caught her by surprise, leaving her both scandalized, and curious.

Now that he'd declared his desire to court her, parts of her were elated. As he'd said, the attraction between them was very real, no matter how much the two of them fought to ignore it. Had she haunted his dreams, the way he'd haunted hers? She didn't know and was much too shy to ask. Still, she wondered what being with him would mean. Would she be a mistress to him, someone he kept on hand to satisfy his male urges? Or would she be his heart's true love, and become his wife?

If they did marry, what would that mean? She'd spent many years held as a piece of property, without any rights or freedom whatsoever. She'd been completely vulnerable in every way, subject to the whims of her master no matter the situation. Would marriage merely mean captivity of a different sort? She didn't know, but she knew she didn't want to give up her freedom, not for anyone or anything.

One thing she enjoyed about baking was that it allowed her time to herself. She was so accustomed to carrying out the measuring and mixing that her mind was free to wander and untangle whatever thoughts and feelings plaguing her. This matter of Will, and his offer to court, would require some tall contemplating. She hoped to retreat to the cake table and prepare for the serving, without encountering anyone who might detain her.

Her hopes were dashed when Marian Goodman stepped into her path.

Rosaline stopped walking in order to avoid colliding with her. "Mrs. Goodman. Is there something I can do for you? I was just about to begin slicing the cake for serving."

Marian gave her a hint of a smile. "I want to talk to you. Can you spare me a moment, dear?"

She nodded, even as she wondered what Mrs. Goodman wanted. She had the distinct feeling that this was not about the cake, and though her interest level was nonexistent, she knew she must hear what the woman had to say, or risk offending her.

Marian took hold of her arm and led her to a quiet corner of the parlor. No people stood nearby, and the only thing occupying the space was a curio cabinet. By now, the caterers were beginning to set out the spread to be served for the afternoon, and the aromas of roasted meats and other tasty dishes scented the air. Rosaline could tell it would be a sumptuous feast, and she hoped her cake would be a

proper ending to the meal.

When Marian spoke to her, her usually loud voice was just above a whisper. “Rosaline, I know this is a personal question, but do you have a beau? Or any plans to marry up soon?”

She shook her head, seeing no reason to inform her of the conversation with Will. “No, I can’t say I do. I’m far too busy with work to even think about such things now.”

Marian slowly shook her head, her pursed lips indicating her disapproval. “Rosaline, dear. I can appreciate your dedication to your work, and your desire to do well in business. But you must consider your age, and the times we live in. It’s important that you think about your future.”

Rosaline stopped herself from scoffing at that. The future was precisely what she thought about most of the time. The past was too painful to think about, and the present often felt like drudgery. “I understand your concerns, Mrs. Goodman.”

“And I hope you’ll take them to heart. Your past may be sullied by captivity, but you’re still a fine, upstanding, hard-working girl.”

Rosaline’s eyes widened at Mrs. Goodman’s words. It wasn’t so much what she’d said, as the tone in which she said it, that angered Rosaline. Mrs. Goodman supposed advice had quickly morphed into an insult; she made it sound as if her status as a former slave were something to be ashamed of. What, did Mrs. Goodman think she’d chosen to be born into captivity? To be slapped in the mouth for the slightest infraction, to be forced to breed like a common hog?

When she said nothing, Marian spoke, as if the silence bothered her. “I hope I haven’t upset you dear. My intentions are good, I promise. I only have one more thing to offer.”

She still said nothing, but eyed Mrs. Goodman expectantly.

“If and when you do choose to marry, go above your station. Marrying someone else who was a captive will only make your life difficult. The two of you would likely be committing to a lifetime of struggle.”

Rosaline couldn’t hold back the soft sigh that escaped her lips. Mrs. Goodman made marriage sound less and less appealing with each word that came out of her mouth. According to her, marriage was a necessity, but a near impossibility for her due to her past. Beyond that, she shouldn’t choose a spouse based on love, but should choose a wealthy man who could give her a life of ease.

“Your expression tells me you hoped to marry for love.”

“Don’t we all?” Rosaline wasn’t a child; she knew the realities of life as a Negro in this country. During her days on the Rhodes plantation, she’d briefly considered jumping to broom to avoid the breeding. She hesitated then because she wanted to know love. When

she'd been declared barren, marriage for any purpose other than true love had become unnecessary. Why should she settle for less than that now that she was free?

Marian offered a smile, yet her eyes held sadness. "Yes, I suppose we do, when we're young. But soon enough, we grow up and realize a love match isn't always a possibility."

Rosaline watched Mrs. Goodman, regarding the wistful look she wore. Was there a hint of regret in her words? Had she married Chauncey to advance her station in life, rather than because he made her heart soar?

Marian seemed to come back to herself, cleared her throat. "Anyhow, dear, that was all I wanted to say. I know it's difficult to hear, but just try to keep an open mind. Happiness can come in many forms, Rosaline. If you're offered a chance at stability, don't dismiss it so quickly."

She bobbed her head up and down, keeping her facial expression as even as she could manage despite the frustration raging inside her.

Seemingly satisfied, Mrs. Goodman walked away, leaving Rosaline there in the quiet corner to reflect on all she'd just heard.

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The four o'clock hour brought a degree of relief from the hottest part of the day. Will stood by the rear of the ship, positioned behind the parlor, watching the churning paddle wheel displace the water as the vessel moved along.

After the Regal Lady, several other ships had passed the Hope's Lantern. He'd greeted the captains and crew members of all of them, even the ones he wasn't familiar with. Navigating this river was a rough enough prospect on its own; it just made sense for the crews manning the vessels to be friendly to one another. One never knew when assistance might be needed.

His stomach growled as he inhaled the aroma of the food being set out in the parlor. The plans for the ship had included a small kitchen area off the parlor, where food could be slow cooked, or kept warm. He and his men had installed a wood burning stove of sorts, which consisted of a long table built into the wall, with a grate inset, and an iron shelf beneath to hold the wood. The stove had also been fitted with a ventilation pipe to allow the smoke to escape.

As a man who'd spent his whole life around fresh cut lumber, he could tell by the scent in the air that the caterers had chosen hickory wood for today's meal. His stomach growled again as he caught the scent of some roasted meat. Deciding to give in to his hunger, he made his way into the parlor to fix himself a plate.

Typical of any party thrown by the Goodmans, the buffet featured an array of delicious foods. Once Will had grabbed a crystal dinner
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plate and silverware, he loaded the plate down with cuts of roast beef, soft yeast rolls, green beans seasoned with ham and onions, and fried potatoes. Adding a cup of punch from the beverage table, he went back out onto the deck and went to where Bret stood, still at the helm.

He took a seat on a nearby crate and asked, “Isn’t Earl coming to relieve you?”

Bret nodded, his eye still on the waters ahead. “Any moment now. Then I can get some vittles.”

Will took a bite of the roast beef and groaned with satisfaction. “It’s very good. Well-seasoned.”

He ate for a few moments before the loud growling of Bret’s stomach caught his attention.

Earl Hartfield, who was first mate for the voyage, finally strolled up. Earl was brown haired, blue-eyed fellow of forty, a rare Yankee transplant from New Jersey in the mid-Atlantic. “Go get something to eat, Longstreet.”

“Gladly.” Bret stepped aside and allowed Earl to step up to the wheel, then disappeared into the parlor get his plate.

Will watched the deft way Earl guided the ship. Having served in the Union navy during the war, Hartfied was a skilled sailor. “How’s the family, Earl?”

“Good. Wife’s carrying again, this’ll be our fourth.”

Will whistled. “Quite a brood you’ve got.”

Earl chuckled, his eyes on the waters ahead. “They are something. Oldest is nearly ten and the youngest just turned two. They keep me plenty busy, that’s for certain.”

Bret returned with his plate and drink, taking a seat on the deck floor near where Will sat. “What’re you hoping for this go ‘round, Earl?”

In response to Bret’s question, Earl smiled. “Mostly I just want a healthy babe, but I won’t be upset if I get another son.”

Will knew that so far, the Hartfield family included Earl, his wife Hazel, and two sons and one daughter. He thought about his own future, and wondered if he’d ever have a family, or even a wife. He could not be sure of his ability to support a family, at least not now. The shipyard had been turning reasonable profits as of late, but certainly not so much that he’d rest on his laurels.

Earl said, “That reminds me, I need to take on whatever extra hours you can give me at the shipyard. Taking care of the youngin’s is getting mighty expensive.”

Will nodded. “Sure, Earl. I can give you a bit more work.”

In truth, Will knew that adding extra time for Earl would put a strain on his payroll budget, but the man was raising a growing brood. He would simply stretch his business dollars a bit, and cut expenses

where he could. Earl was a faithful employee as well as a good friend; giving him a few extra hours was the least Will could do for him.

He thought of Rosaline. He imagined she was busy preparing her cake to be served to the party goers. She always appeared so serious, so fastidious. He knew he'd done the right thing by asking her to be his. Many questions still remained in his mind about how their courtship would progress, if at all. He'd done his part in asking her, now it was up to her to say yes or no.

If she did decide to court him, where would the journey take them? As far as he could tell, he was as easygoing as she was serious. Thinking of it now, he'd never seen her enjoy a deep belly laugh, and he wondered what it would take to amuse her to that point. Would he ever be able to help her release her cares and enjoy life?

Courtships in this day and age were meant to lead to marriage. That was why he'd asked to court her instead of asking her to be his mistress. His intentions were honorable, because he knew Rosaline was too special a woman for mere dalliance. If they were to marry it would lead to yet another conundrum: how would he support his wife, and any children they might have?

Bret's voice broke into his thoughts. "I'll keep my bachelorhood, thank you. Seems to me that taking care of a family is a lot of work. I already work plenty hard at the shipyard."

Earl scoffed. "All of us at the yard put in our share of hard work. But coming home to a clean house, the smell of dinner cooking, and hugs and kisses from my wife and the children makes it all worth it."

Bret rolled his eyes. "Bully for you, Earl. But I believe a man should keep his freedom intact as long as he possibly can. Right now, I answer to nobody, I come and go as I please. I'm not interested in being saddled with all that responsibility."

Will listened to his friends going back and forth, but said nothing. He thought of Bret's assertions of freedom and not answering to anyone. Bret seemed to enjoy his single status. For Will, however, the so-called 'freedom' of bachelorhood only meant spending many cold nights in a big, empty bed. The memories of the only woman he'd ever loved hung over him like a specter, making sleep hard to come by. Responsibility aside, he imagined he would thoroughly enjoy sleeping next to the soft curves of a woman's body; waking up to her beautiful smile and the scent of her perfume clinging to his skin and his bedclothes. To his mind, that role could only be filled properly by Rosaline. His heart and mind were so set on her that no other woman would do.

A uniformed attendant came around, to gather the Goodman's crystal dishes. Will and Bret handed over their empty plates and punch glasses.

As the attendant drifted away with the stack of dishes, Bret stood. “You’re mighty quiet, Will. What’s your take?”

Will shrugged. “I say it’s all about the right woman. If you’ve got the right woman, marriage can be the best thing that ever happened to you; with the wrong one, you’re better off staying single.”

Earl agreed, nodding his head as he navigated the vessel around a sharp bend in the river. “Hazel is the light of my life.”

Bret snickered, shaking his head as he strode away.

Will got to his feet and went to stand by the railing. The afternoon was slowly giving way to evening as the sun descended toward the horizon behind them. The ship sailed smoothly for now, moving along the river at a pace that minimized the rocking and swaying. That pleased him since it meant Earl was following his advice about keeping tight control over the speed of the vessel.

Among the few people standing about the deck, a commotion rose. Will turned to his right, trying to ascertain the source of the excitement.

Mrs. Goodman was strolling through, on the arm of a man. But this man wasn’t Mr. Goodman; the fellow was far too young, and far leaner and taller.

Will opened his ears to the chatter on the deck, picking up snippets of conversations swirling around him.

“He’s studying law, you know.”

“My, isn’t he handsome?”

“He’ll make some lucky girl a fine husband.”

Soon enough, Mrs. Goodman and her young escort reached the end of the deck where Will stood, observing. As the pair drew closer, Will took notice of the young man’s dress, which was a bit formal for a summer day’s cruise down the Cape Fear: a full suit, complete with coat and tie, as well as a pair of well shined black boots. Will guessed the boy must be broiling in the Carolina sun, but if he chose fashion over comfort, that was his burden to bear.

Mrs. Goodman gestured to him as they approached. “Will, I’d love you to meet my nephew, Cornell. He’s my in-laws oldest son, from Columbia. He’s here in North Carolina with us for the summer, but he’s studying law at Benedict College. Cornell, meet William Pruett. He and his men built the Hope’s Lantern.”

The young man stuck out his hand to shake. “A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Pruett.”

Will returned the gesture, noting the young man’s firm grip and the air of confidence around him. “Likewise, but call me Will.”

Cornell nodded. “Certainly. And may I complement you on your work. The Hope’s Lantern is a very fine vessel.”

“Thank you, young man.” Will offered a slight smile to Cornell,

while wondering if a pampered boy from a rich family of free-born blacks possessed enough knowledge of ships to make such a judgment. He decided to keep that question to himself.

Mrs. Goodman piped up. “Will, I’m going to take Cornell to meet Rosaline. She’s a good girl, and she’s been without a husband far too long in my opinion.”

Cornell added, “My aunt seems to think the two of us may suit.”

Will kept his face impassive, inclined his head a bit. Something stirred inside of him, an altogether unpleasant sensation. He hesitated to call it jealousy; after all, he had no claims on the beautiful lady baker. Regardless of that, he didn’t like that Mrs. Goodman seemed intent on pushing her nephew on Rosaline.

For a long moment, Will and Cornell held each other’s’ gazes. He hoped to communicate with the other man, in a way he’d understand, without tipping off his meddling aunt. So he spoke with his eyes, letting his expression tell the young man he’d better set his sights elsewhere. In the silence, he could see the arrogance and the defiance rising in the young man’s eyes.

Cornell finally spoke. “Excuse us, Will. My aunt speaks so highly of this Rosaline, I’m rather anxious to meet her.”

Will gave a silent nod of acknowledgment as the two of them strolled away, likely in search of the woman he wanted to claim for his own. Cornell had, without words, issued a challenge to him.

Will stood tall, straightened his tie. He wouldn’t be put off of courting Rosaline by anyone, least of all this fancy boy who had only recently come out of diapers.

Jaw set, he watched the backs of Mrs. Goodman and her overconfident nephew for a moment. Then he strode away, in the other direction.

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Standing atop the overturned crate again, Rosaline used her steel serving knife to carefully divide the top tier of her cinnamon spice cake into uniform slices. As each slice was made, she lifted it and set it on one of the Goodmans’ crystal dessert plates, held up for her by her young assistant.

Sarah had just set a plate down on the table when her eyes widened. “My, who is that handsome young man with Mrs. Goodman?”

Now working on the second tier, Rosaline didn’t bother to look. “I don’t know, Sarah, and I’m not terribly concerned either way. Pass me another plate, please.”

Sarah made no move to reach for the plate, instead choosing to stare across the room. “Well, they’re coming this way, Miss Rosaline.”

She heaved a sigh and set the knife down on the empty platter
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that had supported the top layer. Turning her head in the direction Sarah indicated, she saw Mrs. Goodman weaving her way through the assemblage. As boisterous and outspoken as they came, Marian Goodman was easy to pick out of a crowd. Still, Rosaline didn't recognize the tall, slender, and admittedly handsome fellow Mrs. Goodman practically dragged in her direction.

She stepped down off the crate and stood next to her starry-eyed assistant, just as Mrs. Goodman and her companion came abreast of them.

"See? She's as fastidious as she is lovely." Mrs. Goodman ribbed the man standing next to her, a conciliatory smile spreading across her golden face.

Rosaline felt her eyebrow hitch. Why in the world was Mrs. Goodman speaking about her to the man, as if she wasn't present? *What in the world is she about?*

Mrs. Goodman spoke again, loud enough to be heard by anyone standing nearby. "Rosaline, dear, this is my nephew, Cornell. He's soon to be a lawyer and I've been just dying to introduce you two."

She sighed inwardly as she stuck her hand out to him. Now she understood the motivation behind the so-called 'advice' Marian had dispensed earlier. She sensed Mrs. Goodman's meddling, and while she assumed the woman's intentions were good, she didn't want to encourage it. Cornell appeared to be much younger than her, and she sensed a haughty, almost condescending air about him. "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Goodman."

He offered a blinding smile as he captured her hand in his own. "Now, my dear. There's no need to be so formal. Please, call me Cornell."

It amused her somewhat that a boy this young would call her such an endearment. She wanted to chuckle since she could almost detect a hint of his mother's milk on his breath. She made eye contact with him, in an attempt at being polite. The moment their eyes connected, she regretted it. She could not recall the last time she'd felt so uncomfortable with someone she'd just met. She watched him raise her hand to his lips and kiss the back of it. When his lips made contact with her skin she fought the urge to jerk away; the boy's regard made her skin crawl. There was something in his eyes; something arrogant and sinister that made a shiver run down her spine.

Mrs. Goodman, totally oblivious to that discomfort, clapped her hands together and squealed with delight. "Look at you two. You're so well suited. Of course, I knew you would be, and I've never been wrong about these things yet!"

Rosaline closed her eyes briefly as she eased her hand out of Cornell's grasp. While Mrs. Goodman claimed to be infallible as a

matchmaker, she'd failed at this attempt, and miserably so. She made a move to get back on the crate, thinking she'd finish slicing the cake.

Determined not to be put off, Mrs. Goodman said, "Come now, Rosaline. Surely you can let Sarah tend to the cake so you can spend a few moments getting to know Cornell. I'm sure she can handle it, can't you dear?"

Still staring up at Cornell, Sarah managed an affirmative bob of her head.

Cornell turned to Rosaline, staying her ascent onto the crate by stepping between her and the crate. "Aunt is correct. I'm sure you assistant is very capable, and I'm eager to learn more about you, my dear."

A small squeal escaped Sarah's lips; Rosaline supposed her young assistant couldn't contain her excitement at having Cornell refer to her as 'capable.'

Rosaline rolled her eyes before she could stop herself, but acquiesced to their rather insistent demands. Mrs. Goodman was a wealthy woman, and she needed the business a sterling review from the Goodman family would generate. Reluctantly, she linked her arm with Cornell.

Sarah grinned, apparently having recovered her ability to speak after being so dazzled by the golden boy of the house of Goodman. "Don't worry, Miss Rosaline. I'll keep the slices even, just like you taught me."

Rosaline groaned inwardly. She would have gladly passed Cornell on to Sarah, after all they seemed to be much closer in age. "Thank you, Sarah."

Rosaline let herself be led away from the cake table and through the tangle of folks standing about the parlor. There were men in fresh shirts and pressed trousers, and women clad in their best summer-weight dresses in soft shades of pinks, yellows, and greens. A few little ones were also on board, running and giggling as they frolicked and played around the legs of the adults. They all seemed to be enjoying their punch and their conversations, and Rosaline envied them. The gears of her mind were turning full tilt, trying to figure out a way to make this "getting to know you" session with Cornell go by as quickly as possible. This was the second time today she'd been approached about courting, and frankly, flattery had now morphed into frustration.

They moved out onto the deck, toward the bow of the ship. Nightfall was coming on, and though she hadn't a clue where they were, she knew they would reach Wilmington before long. She knew from her conversations with Will in the weeks leading up to the cruise that the voyage took about fourteen hours from beginning to end.

Cornell led her past folks standing by the railing, past the first mate steering the ship until they came to a narrow stairwell descending to the lower deck. Up until that moment, she hadn't even known the stairwell existed. She'd been so busy with the cake she'd not had time to explore the ship. Her nerves got the better of her, because she had no idea why he should be leading her below deck, toward some unknown part of the vessel. At the top of the stairs, she hesitated.

"So, where does this lead?" She posed the question both to find out where he was taking her and to stall for time. No one was nearby on this part of the deck, save for the captain, who was busy with navigating the vessel down the river.

Cornell, who was already two steps below her, smiled and patted her hand. "Oh, this is the private family quarters that my aunt and uncle had included in the ship's plans. It's the best place for us to have a bit of privacy, my dear."

She wanted to groan but stifled it, lest he take that as some sort of invitation. The boy was obviously terrible at reading her body language, or else he'd never have insisted she go anywhere with him in the first place. She had no interest in him, and the last thing she wanted was privacy. "I wouldn't want to infringe on your family's private rooms, Cornell."

"Nonsense. You're an invited guest." In the next beat, he was pulling her down the stairs.

She moved her feet, lest she topple over and be dragged.

Just before her head disappeared beneath the deck floor, she cast a glance toward the first mate at the helm, hoping he would see her and notify someone of her predicament.

Her eyes met Earl's briefly, and he gave her an imperceptible nod.

That gave her a modicum of relief. She held her nerves in check because she knew that if Cornell proved to be a bounder, she would make sure he regretted the decision to disrespect her.

Her heart pounding, she followed Cornell into the underbelly of the ship.

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Will scratched his chin as he scanned the deck once more for any sign of Rosaline. He'd been seeking her in every public corner of the ship for several minutes now, and not finding her anywhere. Something about her absence worried him. Even though the cake had already been served and she was no longer on duty, it seemed odd to him that she'd disappeared.

He spotted Bret, who was gesturing to him from near the ship's wheel. Taking long strides, he went over to see what his friend wanted.
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Bret launched into a speech as soon as he drew near. “Will, you’d best check down below for Rosaline.”

Will, familiar with every nook and cranny of the vessel, knew that the hull of the ship was home to storage areas and the private quarters Mrs. Goodman had requested for the ship. “Why would she be down there?”

“I don’t know, but Earl saw her going down there just a while ago, with that Cornell Goodman.”

Will stared at his friend wide-eyed, looking for confirmation of what he’d just heard. Would that boy really be bold enough to shanghai Rosaline, with all the people present on this ship? Did he have so little concern for propriety, and for her reputation?

Earl’s grim expression confirmed it. “She didn’t look none too happy about being taken down there, neither. I think she was trying to signal me, but I couldn’t leave my post at the wheel.”

Will felt his jaw tighten, and he curled his hands into fists at his sides. “So the fancy boy has taken her down below, eh? I think I’ll just look in on them.”

“Do you want me to come along? Earl’s steering the ship the rest of the way.” Bret gestured with a jerk of his head toward the first mate, still working the wheel.

Will shook his head, already moving toward the hidden staircase. “No. I’ll handle this, but I’ll holler up if I need you, so stay close.”

Bret lifted his chin to signal his understanding.

Will rolled up his shirt sleeves, and made a slow descent of the stairs.

As he moved below deck, the din of the conversations above faded, replaced by the sounds of people’s footsteps as they moved about above him. He could hear the hum of the engine and the water being sloshed by the paddle wheel as he stepped off the bottom rung and moved down the narrow corridor leading to the quarters.

He passed the room set aside for storage first, then the path took a slight bend to the right. The door to the Goodmans’ quarters was closed, but as he moved nearer to it, he could hear voices. One voice was female, and he knew it belonged to Rosaline. The other, more masculine voice, he assumed to be Cornell.

He pressed his ear against the door to listen to their conversation.

Cornell asked, “Why are you so shy, my darling?”

Rosaline replied, “I’m not shy, just not interested, as I’ve told you before.”

“Surely you can see the benefits of being with a man like me. I’m well off, educated, and can provide you with an easy life if you’ll let me.”

Silence.

Cornell said, “Ah, there is someone else, then. I see it in your eyes. Who is it? Who holds your heart?”

Will’s ears perked up as he waited for her response to that very direct question.

Finally, she announced it. “My heart lies with William Pruett, the man who built this ship. Not that it’s any of your concern.”

Upon hearing that, Will felt his own heart turn a somersault in his chest. A smile spread across his face, but quickly faded when he heard Cornell’s next words.

Cornell’s tone turned dry and bitter. “Oh, so it’s the shipbuilder? You would truly choose a man like that over me, when I can give you so much more?”

She sounded offended. “What do you mean, a man like that?”

“He was a slave, wasn’t he?”

“So was I! And what has that to do with anything?”

Now Cornell went silent.

Leaning against the door, Will wanted dearly to burst in and slug the fellow right in his uppity mouth. A still, small voice inside told him to wait, so he did.

Rosaline said, “One would think you’d be happy I’m sticking to my own ilk, instead of sullying your good name by marrying you.”

Cornell seemed to grow even more irate. “You should only be so lucky as to marry me, and raise your social station. I’m offering you the only chance you’ll ever get!”

“Have you ever considered that I don’t want what you’re offering? Or that he can give me what I truly need?”

“Is that so? And what’s so wonderful about your William, anyhow?”

At that moment, Will’s decision was made. He grasped the handle of the oak door, the one he’d carved by hand only a few weeks before. With a gentle nudge, he pushed the door open.

His eyes on the cocky young man, he announced, “For one thing, I’m a very patient man. Otherwise I’d already have throttled you for treating Rosaline this way.”

Cornell’s head swiveled to look at him, and his eyes were as wide as the Atlantic. “What’s the meaning of this intrusion?”

Will folded his arms over his chest. “You can’t simply spirit an unmarried woman away like this.”

The younger man looked very put out. “What of it? This common heifer should be honored I’m offering on her!”

In the split second Cornell’s attention was off of her, Rosaline balled her fist and drew back.

In the next moment, her blow connected with Cornell’s jaw.

“OH!” He yowled like a wounded pup, stumbling backward

several steps before toppling to the floor on his backside.

Will whistled, admittedly impressed. Here he'd thought she might need rescuing, and it turned out Cornell would be the one in need of help. She was amazing, truly amazing.

Rosaline gave him a half smile, flexing her fingers and wincing as if the blow had hurt her hand. "Thanks for distracting him for me."

He looked to her. "That wasn't my intent, but I'm glad I could assist you."

A moment passed while they regarded each other, and he sensed an air of congeniality and mutual respect between the two of them.

Cornell rubbed his struck jaw, struggling into a sitting position. He appeared as dazed and out of sorts as a man who'd spent an entire night drinking. "You bitch! How dare you?"

Will was on him before he could draw his next breath. He knelt so that he straddled Cornell's lower body, and grabbed up the front of his fancy shirt.

Looking straight into the young man's eyes, he spoke. "Mr. Goodman, if you slur her again, I'll put my foot so far up your ass you'll taste my boot. Do you understand me?"

Cornell's head bobbed up and down furiously.

Roughly, Will released the boy's shirtfront, roughly tossed him backwards. Then he stood and walked over to Rosaline, catching her hand in his own.

She gazed up at him with a sparkle in her eyes. "If I were in the market for a champion, I'd choose you."

He squeezed her hand, walking her to the corridor. "So I've heard."

And he escorted her up the narrow stairs to the deck above.

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Back above deck, Rosaline inhaled deeply. She knew that appearing before the other party-goers while holding hands with Will would get tongues wagging, but she didn't care. The way he'd stood up for her a while ago only made her more sure of her decision to court him. Listening to Marian Goodman, and seeing the sad look in the older woman's eyes when she'd spoken of missing out on a love match, Rosaline knew she had to honor the feelings she harbored for Will. She hadn't told him verbally, but as she looked his way and saw the smile touching the corners of his mustached mouth, she felt the silent agreement flowing between them.

They strolled to the back of the ship, just behind the parlor and above the churning paddle wheel. Most of the people on board were inside the parlor, and the din of their conversations floated on the evening air. When they stopped at the railing, she looked side to side, and saw no one else on this end of the ship. Seeing that they were
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alone, she relaxed a bit and directed her gaze up toward the sky.

From their position, the view of the sunset took her breath away. The fiery orange orb of the sun sank below the tops of the towering pines, centering the broad ribbons of purple, red, and gold festooning the horizon. The sounds of the chatter inside faded beneath the sloshing water thrown off by the paddle wheel, and the chirping and croaking of the frogs and insects hidden in the foliage along the river's edge.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" His velvet baritone invaded her thoughts.

"It is." She couldn't recall ever having taken the time to view the setting sun, or reflect on its beauty. The showy colors she saw above her now made her vow to change that.

His hand was still clasped around hers, and he used that as leverage to gently draw her close to him, so that she stood in front of him. The front of his body made contact with the back of hers, and a shiver of wanting ran down her spine.

She knew they should not be here this way, knew propriety demanded they leave a reasonable amount of space between them. But he awakened something inside her body, some primal yearning that overrode her ability to care about what society deemed proper. Just last night she'd dreamed of the hard lines of his body; now his muscled form was flush with her own. His arms encircled her waist, and she let her head fall back against the steadying strength of his shoulder. Her tongue darted out to dampen her lower lip, and her eyes slid closed.

"I gather you're accepting my offer of courting."

"Yes." The word escaped her on a sigh, and without hesitation.

Even in the darkness she could sense his smile. "Good. I'll be sure to make you glad you said yes, Rosie."

They lapsed into silence, and she relished the feeling of his strong arms wrapped around her, and his broad chest supporting her. Where his pelvis touched the fullest part of her hips, she could feel his desire. Heat filled her cheeks at the sensation of his hardness against her. While she felt somewhat scandalous for being here with him this way, she couldn't help being pleased that he wanted her just as she did him.

She opened her eyes to the darkened sky, saw the rising moon overhead. The moon controlled the ebb and flow of the tide, pushing and pulling it to and fro at the shore. In this moment, she was the water and he was the moon, drawing her to heed his call.

Her thoughts were interrupted as he moved his hands up her forearms, using them to turn her around so that she was facing him.

The motion of the ship seemed to cease, but her body and soul remained adrift. "Are we moving?"

In the dim, she saw him nod. “Don’t you feel it?”

“The only thing I feel is myself, drifting to you.” The words tumbled from her mouth before she could catch them and hold them at bay.

His big hand moved up to capture her jaw. Eyes glittering like starlight on the water, he tilted her face up.

She offered no protest as his mouth collided with hers.

His lips were as soft as summer rain, yet his kiss held the urgency of a raging thunderstorm. Her arms wound around his neck as his free arm snaked around her waist. Time and existence faded into nothingness as she experienced the heady bliss of his tongue slipping between her parted lips to plumb the cavern of her mouth. No man had ever truly kissed her before. The chaste pecks on the cheek she’d gotten up until now could not be compared to the skilled seduction flowing from the man who held her so close to his heart.

“Well, I never!” The sudden sound of the irate shout made her break the kiss, and turn to see where the words came from.

Rosaline took a big step to the left, and she and Will both turned their gazes toward the sound.

There, fists propped on her large hips, stood Marian Goodman, her face twisted into a disapproving frown. Her nephew Cornell stood alongside her, eyeing them angrily. The boy still held a hand to his jaw; either it still pained him, or he wanted to hide the bruise.

Marian launched into a diatribe, complete with wagging finger. “Rosaline! I thought better of you than this? What do you mean by trysting in the dark with William, aboard my ship of all places?”

Rosaline rolled her eyes, not caring if Mrs. Goodman could see her, though the dim light made it doubtful. “We aren’t trysting, Mrs. Goodman, simply enjoying each other’s company.”

“And I suppose you prefer Will’s company to that of my nephew, even after he showed himself to be a brute?”

Confusion knit Rosaline’s brow. “A brute? How so?”

Marian gestured to her nephew. “You know what he did! He struck Cornell, like a common bully! Who knows when that bruise will heal?”

Will’s eyes widened, and he seemed to be holding back a chuckle. “You mean, he told you *I* hit him?”

Marian crossed her arms over her chest angrily. “He did, and what is so funny?”

By now Will’s body was shaking with deep, rumbling laughs.

Rosaline struggled to contain her own mirth as she admitted, “I hit him, Mrs. Goodman. I had to protect myself from his rather overt advances.”

One of the crewmen strolled by with his torch, lighting the

hanging lanterns secured to the outer walls of the ship's main parlor. The four of them remained silent while the man went about his task. When he walked away, the light cast on the group let Rosaline see the deep red staining Cornell's face.

Marian looked up to her nephew. "Cornell, is that true?"

The angry faced boy said nothing, but his gaze dropped to his feet as if he were suddenly pressed to examine his shoes.

With the laughter still shut up inside her, Rosaline did her best to explain Cornell's bruised jaw. "Your nephew took me below deck to your family's quarters. Had Will not shown up and intervened, I fear I would have been compromised. But I was the one who hit him, and I won't apologize for protecting myself."

Will's laughing fit cooled a bit, and he composed himself. He seemed to sense the charge of seriousness hanging in the air.

Marian's blazing eyes went to Cornell, who was still looking at the floor. "Boy, you took her down below? Why in Sam Hill would you do a thing like that?"

"I just wanted to talk to her." Cornell's mumbled response was further muffled by the fact that he seemed to be talking to the deck floor.

"You could have done that above deck, you ninny!" Marian shouted.

Cornell said nothing, stuffed his hands in the pockets of his trousers.

A sound of utter disgust erupted from Marian's mouth. "If she hadn't walloped you I'd smack you myself! You'd better locate your sense and fast, because if you're going to behave so foolishly you'll have no chance of practicing law with any success."

Rosaline watched the exchange in silence. Inwardly, she felt relieved that Cornell's lack of good judgment would not cause her to lose the Goodmans' patronage of her bakery. She was also glad to see Mrs. Goodman taking her nephew to task. It was far better he learn to have some decency about himself now, while he was still young. If he hit full adulthood and held on to such behavior, who knew what horror and shame he might visit on some poor, unsuspecting lady?

Marian then turned to address Rosaline. "Dear, please excuse my nephew's foolhardy behavior."

Rosaline nodded. "I think he's learned his lesson."

Marian looked between Rosaline and Will, and continued. "I can see you've made your choice as to who you'll court. Still, I'm not running a floating house of ill-repute here, so try to contain yourselves until we reach Wilmington."

Rosaline didn't care for the implication of Mrs. Goodman's words, and from the hard set of Will's jaw, she could tell that he didn't either.

It was as if Mrs. Goodman expected them to undress each other and have at it, right there on the deck. As much as her body called out for him, she knew better than to give in to her urges so carelessly.

She offered a nod to Mrs. Goodman, but said nothing, lest she tell the older woman what she thought of her insulting insinuations.

Marian grabbed the sheepish looking Cornell by the arm and yanked him back toward the open doors of the parlor.

Left alone again on the deck, Rosaline looked up at Will.

His eyes, which had hardened when Marian made her rude comment, now softened considerably as they focused on her. “I can’t believe he told his aunt I struck him. I should whack him over the head now, just to make an honest man out of him.”

She chuckled. “I suppose he was too embarrassed to let her know he’d been shown the err of his ways by a mere woman.”

His fingertips grazed along her jawline in a caress. “It will be hard for me to follow Mrs. Goodman’s edict. There is something about you that makes me want to be very improper.”

She sighed, his words heating her to the core. Thankfully the cool of evening had set in, and a breeze rustled the silk blooms atop her hat, offering some respite from the heat generated by his nearness. She wanted to tell him of her dream, to let him know that he wasn’t alone in his scandalous notions.

Smiling up at him, she mimicked the caress he’d given her. “We will simply have to do the best we can.”

He grasped her hand, and they walked together toward the parlor.

Inside the crowded space, Rosaline glanced toward the table where her cake had been displayed. Her smile brightened when she saw that nearly every piece had been eaten. Only a few of the slices remained, and from the chatter she heard around her, her cinnamon spice cake had been a big hit with the party-goers.

Sarah was seated on the crate, still watching over the cake. When the youngster saw Rosaline and Will, her face showed a broad grin. Rosaline could only shake her head at Sarah’s exuberance.

The tinkling sound of metal striking glass rose over the laughter and conversation filling the space, until quiet fell over the gathering. Rosaline looked toward the sound and saw Chauncey Goodman, tapping one of the crystal punch cups with a fork. Marian stood dutifully by his side, but Cornell was nowhere to be seen. Rosaline supposed his aunt and uncle had exiled him to the quarters to save themselves the embarrassment of having him bruised face be seen by everyone aboard the ship.

“Good evening, folks. Marian and I want to thank you all for joining us on this cruise. We couldn’t have asked for a better group to

celebrate this momentous occasion with us. The captain has informed me that we're less than an hour away from docking in Wilmington, but there's something I'd like to say before we arrive."

Rosaline clapped politely, along with the others present. Will released her hand to join in the applause.

Chauncey continued his speech. "For those of you among us who aren't familiar with Juneteenth, let me enlighten you. Emancipation became the law of this nation on December 6, 1865, as set forth by President Lincoln and the Congress with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. This amendment was first signed January 31st of that year. Here in North Carolina, the amendment was ratified on December 4th of that same year."

She nodded, her hand going to her mouth as she remembered the day she'd been freed. The blue coats and the stern faces of the Union soldiers who made the announcement at the plantation were etched in her mind. Their words announcing her release from bondage, by order of the governments of both the United States and the state of North Carolina, were the sweetest sound she'd ever heard.

"Juneteenth is a celebration of June 19th, 1865, the day when our brothers and sisters in southern Texas finally discovered that they had been freed. We gather here, on this tenth anniversary of that blessed day, to celebrate our freedom. We remember the ancestors who didn't live to see this day, knowing they are rejoicing in heaven. But while we celebrate, we must not become complacent. More work must be done."

A few shouts of agreement rose among the folks gathered.

Above the shouts, Chauncey raised his voice. "We must continue the work of gaining full freedom in this nation. We must agitate, we must demonstrate, until all citizens of this country can enjoy the same rights. Let us never forget those who died in bondage, and let us do what is necessary to make sure our descendants can experience the full measure of freedom!"

Cheers erupted from the crowd. Rosaline, with tears standing in her eyes, joined in. Chauncey Goodman was a man of few words, but no one could deny the passion and conviction he'd spoken with on the importance of this occasion.

Will clapped boisterously, his face belying a degree of emotion. "What a speech."

As she dabbed the tears from her cheeks with her handkerchief, she had to agree.

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The nine o'clock hour found the ship docking on the shore at Wilmington. As the crew dropped the anchor and secured the ship, Will stood on the deck, looking out over the expanse of the
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Wilmington shoreline. The jagged lines of the tops of buildings broke the horizon. Gas lamps were lit in the windows of homes and the few businesses still open at this hour. The clear night sky above was dotted with stars, their reflections sparkling like crystals on the surface of the water.

The gangplank was set up, and folks began to gather their belongings and disembark. He looked over his shoulder, and could see Rosaline working with Sarah to pack the platters and serving things from her cake into the crates she'd brought on board. The ship would be secured overnight, as Clem and Earl were remaining on board to keep watch, and to make sure the vessel was prepared for the trip back up the river come tomorrow morning.

Their task completed, Rosaline and Sarah made their way out of the parlor and onto the deck. As Sarah moved on down the gangplank with two other girls her age and their female chaperon, he eased to Rosaline's side.

"Are you headed to the River's Edge tonight?" She looked up into his eyes as she posed the question.

The River's Edge was a popular boardinghouse along the shore of the river, where many of the folks on the cruise would be spending the night. The Goodmans and their closest friends would be staying at the cottage the family maintained on Wrightsville Beach; even now they were loading into a carriage for the trip. "Yes, but I need to remain on board until everyone has cleared off."

She nodded her understanding. "Shall I wait for you in the lobby, then?"

He leaned down to kiss her brow. "Please do."

She gifted him with a sweet smile, then she and that fancy hat went down the gangplank to the shore.

Wearing a smile of his own, he turned and went in search of Bret.

He found the ship's captain in the makeshift kitchen. Bret and the head chef from the catering company were removing the spent hickory from the iron grate beneath the custom stove.

Bret looked up when Will entered. "We shouldn't be much longer, just making sure the fire's out."

"Take your time. We don't want any mishaps." Will had been building ships for more than a decade, he knew that since the vessels were constructed primarily of wood, any little un-exstinguished spark could spell utter disaster.

He left the two of them to their work, searching out Clem and Earl. Clem was cleaning up the refuse in the parlor, and Earl was down below, moving some items the Goodmans wanted put away into the storage room. Will assisted Earl with the moving of some of the heavier items before going back above deck.

Once he'd been assured by Bret that all was well in the kitchen, he and his captain got their valises and left the ship via the gangplank, making their way toward the boardinghouse.

Bret quipped, "You seem eager to reach our destination."

Will stifled a yawn. "I'm tired. It's been quite a day."

"That's true, but I know you're rushing to meet Rosaline."

Will stopped mid-step and turned to Bret.

Bret offered a chuckle. "The parlor does have windows, you know. I saw you with her on the deck earlier."

He frowned. If Bret had seen them, only heaven knew who else had witnessed their little tryst.

Slapping him on the shoulder, Bret chuckled again. "Don't worry, you'll hear no scolding from me." He gave an exaggerated wink.

Shaking his head, Will set his feet moving again.

They arrived at the boardinghouse within a few minutes. He glanced around the lobby for any sign of Rosaline, and spotted her reclining in an upholstered chair by the window, engrossed in reading a newspaper. She'd taken off the flowered hat, revealing the curly dark locks of her hair. Smiling, he went to the desk to check in.

He didn't want to disturb her until it was necessary, so he didn't call out to her. Instead he and Bret got their keys and went upstairs to their separate rooms. Once he'd deposited the small bag containing a clean change of clothes and his shaving supplies in the room, he spent a moment refreshing himself. He removed his tie and opened the top button of his shirt, ran a boar bristle brush through his hair and left it unbound. Then he locked the door and went back downstairs to meet her.

Before he could call her name, she lowered the newspaper and greeted him with a sweet smile. He reached out to her with his hand, and she placed hers within it. With a gentle tug he helped her to stand.

As he pulled her close to him, she asked, "Are we going somewhere? It's so late."

"Come with me outside to the riverbank, so we can sit and talk." He wanted to take her away from the prying eyes of the others staying at the boardinghouse, some of whom had gathered in the lobby to chat and play cards.

She looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. "Alright."

Hand in hand, they strolled out of the boardinghouse and into the cool evening air.

A soft breeze rustled the grass as they walked toward the river front. A number of boats were docked in the slips, but there were no people about. It was nearly eleven o'clock now, and even though he knew it wasn't proper to be alone with her at this hour, he could think

of nothing else he'd rather do.

He eyed a spot close to the water's edge, where thin blades of summer green grass poked up through the sandy soil. Leading her there, he sat, and gestured for her to sit next to him.

She brushed her long skirt beneath her hips and sat where he'd indicated.

For a moment, he simply enjoyed sitting next to her in the quiet. The only sounds were the wind rustling the trees across the river, and the rippling of the water. He looked at her, his eyes drinking in the profile of her face as a breeze lifted the wispy tendrils of hair hanging loose around her face. A serene expression graced her lovely face as she looked out over the moonlit surface of the water.

"Tell me your story, Rosaline." More than anything, he wanted to learn all there was to know about her, or at least as much as she felt comfortable enough to reveal.

She inhaled deeply, her shoulders drooping. "My story is a bit sad. Perhaps you should go first."

He wondered what she meant by that, but if it would put her at ease to hear him tell his tale first, so be it. "I was born in Fayetteville. My mother's name was Annette, and my father's name was John. I don't remember much about either of them."

"Why not?"

"My mother was the sister of Mistress Pruett, and my father was a slave."

She said nothing, but her wide eyes belied her surprise.

A bitter laugh preceded his next words. "When my master found out about their dealings, my father was sold Deep South, to a master known for his brutality. As for my mother, she was shunned by the family and sent away with orders never to set foot on Pruett land again."

"How old were you then?"

"About two or three. They'd managed to hide their relationship up until then. After they left, the cook, Tilly, saw to my raising. Tilly's the one who told me the story of my parents. She was up in age, and she died back in '63. Miss her something awful. "

She blinked a few times. "It seems we both have a sad story, then."

He shrugged. The years of emotional pain he'd suffered over the absence of his parents, along with the physical pain of toiling from sunup to sundown at the shipyard, had left him numb to some degree. "Being raised in captivity, I guess it's to be expected."

With tears standing in her eyes, she asked, "Did they force you to breed with the females?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Spent my whole life working in the

yard, as far back as I can remember, that's all the master wanted me to do."

She fell silent for a moment, and a fat tear slid down her cheek.

He wondered why she'd asked that question. What had brought that subject to mind? The longer he looked at her, sitting there with the tears filling her beautiful eyes, the clearer it became. "Rosie my sweet."

She nodded, the same sadness he'd seen earlier returning to her face. "They tried to breed me, but I couldn't carry. No matter how many times they sent a buck to my cabin, they could never get me with child."

His heart wrenched in his chest as if being squeezed by a vice. How could anyone treat her so cruelly, when she was such a delicate flower? The evils of slavery were many and varied, but among them all, the vicious tradition of rape bothered him the most. The very idea of such barbarism set his stomach roiling. He didn't know why his master and mistress never forced him to breed, but hearing her tale made him glad they hadn't.

He laced his arm around her shoulder, and pulled her close to him. A volatile mixture of hatred and anger coursed through him, but he let the sympathy and care he felt for her cool them. He knew he could not undo the pain of her past, still he hoped she'd find some solace within the shelter of his arms.

She wept openly now, and he held her, with his free hand stroking the top of her head. He said nothing, instead letting her release the sorrow pent up within her.

Finally she brought the back of her hand up to her face, to wipe away her tears. With wet eyes, she looked up to him. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. No one should have to endure that kind of treatment."

She sniffled, dashed away another tear. "Thank you for hearing me."

He squeezed her shoulder. "I want to learn everything I can about you, Rosie."

Her damp eyes widened into a curious stare. "Why?"

He brush his lips against one damp cheek, then the other. "If I'm to love you in the way you need me to, I should know all there is to know about you."

Her lip trembled, and her open palm went to his jawline. "Then where shall I begin?"

"Wherever you like." And he meant it. Whatever she had to say, he wanted to hear it.

So, with the evening breeze playing though her hair, she began. "I never knew my mother. I'm told her name was Polly. She was fifteen

when she gave birth to me, and the birthing killed her. I have no siblings that I'm aware of, because I never knew who fathered me, either. Iola, the woman who raised me, tells me it could have been any one of four men sent to breed my mother."

Will held her even closer to him as he listened to the tale. The grim reality of life in captivity was such that he wouldn't wish it on his worst enemy; he knew that. But hearing such a tragic story from her made him want to travel back in time and kill the ones who conceived such an egregious institution, before the treachery could ever be carried out.

"Is Iola still living?"

She shook her head. "No. She lived long enough to be freed, but by the summer of '66, she was gone from me."

He noted the sadness stinging her words, and he could relate all too easily. While Tilly had not birthed him, she had raised him in love. Losing her had been very painful, almost as painful as... he tried to push the thoughts away.

She seemed to pick up on his tension, because she asked, "Will? What's the matter?"

He sighed, knowing he could not lie to her. "There was a woman I loved, many years ago."

She dropped her hand from his face, and her gaze lowered. "There was?"

He took a deep breath, and braced himself to tell her what he'd never told anyone else. "Yes. Her name was Starla Gates, and she was owned by a family on a neighboring plantation. I was just a boy then, about seventeen. I thought her the most lovely creature in the world, but I never had the courage to tell her how I felt."

She asked the inevitable question. "What happened to her?"

He swallowed the lump forming in his throat. "She was caught trying to escape in December of '64. The master was so angry, he beat her to death."

Tears sprang anew to her eyes. "In '64?"

He nodded, not needing to say what they were both thinking: If Starla had lived a few months longer, she would have gotten the freedom she so desperately sought.

The pain of losing her had dulled much over the years, leaving only a few traces that surfaced from time to time.

Now Rosaline changed position, coming to sit atop his lap. There, she settled in, and wrapped her arms around him, holding him close. "I'm sorry, Will. Truly I am."

Her embrace did much to soothe the remnants of hurt and anger inside him. She'd given him the gift of a listening ear, allowing him to cleanse his soul of the darkness that had followed him for more than a

decade. So he spoke his heart to her, in recompense for her kindness. “The day Starla was buried, I vowed to never hold back my feelings again. It hurt me so deeply, I didn’t know if another woman would ever capture my heart. But I promised myself that if I ever loved again, I would do so fully, fearlessly.”

She gazed up at him, the moonlight illuminating the lines of her lovely face. As he looked at her, he felt his burden lifting, as if he were finally free of the specter of his unspoken love for Starla.

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She trembled as the intensity in his eyes touched every soft and vulnerable place within her.

Neither of them spoke a word, yet their gazes remained locked. She felt herself falling into the depths of his dark eyes, felt her soul opening to him the way a blooming flower spread its petals toward the sun.

There was affection there, sparking between them. She loved him and she knew it, there was no getting around it. But she knew better than to tell him that, lest she be cut to the core if he didn’t return her feelings. Though she felt nearly certain she’d won his heart, she could not risk the pain of discovering him to be unwilling to admit it. Now that he knew her secret shame, and of her inability to bear him strong sons, she knew he might never fully surrender to the feelings between them.

She touched his brow with gentle fingers, tracing along his hairline and letting her finger graze the line of his strong jaw. She wanted to remember his face this way, wanted to etch the sight of his heated gaze in her mind. If he never revealed his heart to her, if he never returned the love growing in her heart, she would at least have her memories of this night.

She eyed him expectantly, waiting to see if he would speak.

He said nothing, but moved his hands to her head, reaching into the mass of curls to remove the pins that bound her hair up. It was another impropriety; letting her hair down outdoors this way.

She could not have cared less, and made no move to stop him as he extracted pin after pin. He stopped when her hair fell free around her shoulders. With her hair unbound, she felt a measure of vulnerability, as if her heart and soul were laid bare to him.

He raked his hands through her hair, the pads of his fingers massaging her scalp. “Your hair is beautiful, my love.”

*Love?* Had he really said that, or had her amorous mind fooled her into thinking he did?

He said it again. “You are my love.”

She was sure of it this time. His endearment, coupled with his gentle touch, entranced her. She sighed, her eyes closing against the
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blissful sensation.

"Did you hear me, Rosie? I love you. I love you, darling."

"I can't give you babies." It pained her to say the words, but she felt she must remind him of that unfortunate truth.

"I don't need babies. All I need is you."

She drew in a sharp breath, feeling her heart thumping in her chest like the drums of the Motherland.

"A woman should be able to bear..."

He cut her off. "Don't. I only need you. Your love is the greatest treasure I could ever hope to possess."

She was so overcome by his touch and his sweet declarations, she could not speak.

"Let me love you, Rosie."

Her breaths came faster and shorter now, stacking up in her throat.

He repeated himself, his fingertips never leaving her their place in the depths of her hair. "You don't have to say you love me now, Rosie. But I promise to love you so sweetly, so deeply, you will choose to love me back."

The tears of emotion welled in her eyes, and at that moment, she felt her soul opening to him. The knots and snarls of pain she held inside began to unravel; released by the intensity of his caring for her. At last she found her voice, and she expressed the feelings blossoming inside. "I love you, Will."

Her words were breathless, hushed, and truer than any other words she'd ever said. Every encounter they'd shared over the last year or more, when she stopped to chat with him in town, the many smiles and pleasantries they'd exchanged, had all been leading to this moment. She could never have guessed what was happening between them, hadn't even sensed the subtle way he'd stolen her heart. But in this moment, sitting with him on the shore of the river, she felt safer than she ever had before. He'd enraptured her, and now, she had no choice but to give herself over to him, for as long as she drew breath.

The ministrations of his fingers on her scalp slowed, then stopped. She opened her eyes to see him watching her, desire glittering in his gaze. She recalled the dream she'd had about him. The gown-singeing look he'd given her then paled in comparison to the one he was giving her now. It made her glad they were near a water source, just in case she burst into flames.

He was hard for her, she could feel it. The iron length of him had expanded, and was pressed into her bottom due to her rather comfortable seat atop his lap.

He slid his hand around to the back of her neck and pulled her in to his kiss. Her lips parted almost immediately, and his tongue slipped

inside her mouth, twisting and stroking against her own.

Wild, hot passion flowed between them. Her hands gripped the corded muscles of his shoulders, while his fingertips toured the small of her back. His touch seemed to penetrate the fabric of her shirtwaist and corset, singeing the tender skin beneath. Their tongues mated and played against each other until she thought she'd melt into a puddle, right there on his lap.

Finally she drew back, breathless, panting. His eyes were still on her, and still held the heat of a thousand suns.

"Am I making you uncomfortable, my sweet?"

She managed a smile even as she tried to get her wits about her. "No. I rather enjoy this. It's just that I'd prefer not to make love out here, in the open."

He showed her a broad grin. "I suppose I can understand that."

She felt a modicum of relief, noting that he didn't seem to be angered by her request to slow things down. At the pace they'd been moving, she knew she'd been mere moments away from casting aside all good sense, and letting him have his wicked way with her, right where they sat.

She turned on his lap, so that her back was to him, willing her racing pulse to slow as she focused on the surface of the water.

"I don't know about you, but I could use some cooling off."

She nodded when she heard his softly spoken words. "I could as well. Do you want to go back into the boardinghouse for a cool drink?"

"Not yet." He shifted a bit, and used his hands to lift her from his lap.

She moved aside, watched him as he stood and walked to the very edge of the water. "I hope you're not going for a swim, because if you are, I'm not going with you." Only the good Lord knew what was lurking in the dark depths of the river, and she was of no mind to find out.

He squatted on the bank, chuckling. "Don't worry. I've got no more desire to swim than you." He undid the laces of his boot and pulled them off, setting them in the sand beside him. Next he removed his socks, and when his feet were bare, he slid as close as he could to the river's edge.

When she saw him dangling his feet into the water, she giggled. Deciding that baring her feet was the least scandalous of all the things she'd like to do right now, she stripped off her own slippers and stockings, and joined him. Soon, they were sitting hip to hip in the sand, and she gasped as she lowered her feet into the chilly water.

It took a few moments for her to become accustomed to the temperature of the water, but she soon did. Submerged to the ankles,

she relished the feeling of the cool liquid lapping around her feet. She'd not dangled her feet in the river this way in years. She recalled the way she and a number of the slaves from her plantation had waded into the water on the day they'd been set free. That day, they'd frolicked and splashed in the water, while shouting the joy of liberty to the heavens above.

He clasped his arm around her waist. "Now, isn't that nice?"

She turned to him with smiling eyes. Nice didn't even begin to cover it.

That day more than a decade ago, she experienced her first taste of freedom, and her very soul had soared on the wings of joy.

And she knew that being with him would show her an even sweeter freedom: the freedom of pure, unabashed love.

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*March, 1876*

Rosaline stood near the back door of her cabin, looking out on the small yard behind the house. The two coal black puppies seemed to be having a lovely time wrestling. Will had brought them home at the end of February, less than two weeks ago. She'd named the two female pups Sugar and Spice. Sugar was solid black, while Spice possessed a light brown streak running down her snout. She had no idea what breed they were, and she didn't much care- she'd loved them on sight.

At present, the pups were tangled up together in their pen, looking like a single ball of dark fluff as they rolled around on the wood chips covering the floor. A smile lifted the corners of her mouth as she watched their play.

Will appeared soundlessly behind her, draping his arms around her waist.

Though she hadn't heard his approach over the pups' squeals, she did smell the scent of fresh cut timber and linseed oil that always accompanied him.

"Evenin', my love. Enjoying the dogs, I see." The deep timbre of his voice overrode her thoughts.

She leaned into the warmth of her husband's solid chest and sighed. "They're so cute. Thank you for bringing them home."

He placed a soft kiss against the hollow of her neck. "Earl's dog had pups, and I knew you'd want at least one."

She sighed, relishing his embrace. *He knows me so well.* She was a simple woman with simple dreams, and he seemed to know them all. "When do you think we can get away to visit the orphanage in Raleigh?"

Behind her, he shrugged. "I can do it sometime next week. As
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soon as we complete the repairs on The Regal Lady, I can turn things over to Earl and Bret for a while. But don't you have sweets to attend to?"

She nodded. "Mrs. Goodman has commissioned me to make a strawberry shortcake for her church's Ladies' Auxiliary. I'll deliver it to the church on Thursday."

His warm breath touched her bared shoulders as he spoke. "Then we'll make the trip on Monday. Is that agreeable?"

"It is." Their marriage was still young, but they both possessed a strong desire for a child or two to complete their family. Since she knew the process of adopting a youngster might take quite some time, they were looking into their options now.

"If things go as planned, we'll certainly have our hands full. Two businesses, the pups, and a babe or two…"

"I know. But it will be a beautiful chaos, I'm certain of it."

"I admire your outlook, my dear. And I agree. Together, we can conquer anything."

She turned in the circle of his arms to smile up at him. When they'd married on the shore of the river on the first day of the New Year, she'd known he would bring her joy like she'd never experienced before. Now, in the thick of that joy, she whispered, "I love you, Will Pruett."

"And I love you, Rosaline Pruett." He bent his head to gift her with a kiss so potent, her knees went as soft as melted butter.

When the kiss ended, she met his eyes with a wicked smile. "Then come to the bedroom and show me how you feel."

So he lifted her up into his strong arms, brought her inside the house, and kicked the door shut with the toe of his boot.

About the Author

Like any good Southern belle, Kianna Alexander wears many hats: loving wife, doting mama, advice-dispensing sister, and gabbing girlfriend. She's a voracious reader, an amateur seamstress and occasional painter in oils. Chocolate, American history, sweet tea, and Idris Elba are a few of her favorite things. A native of the TarHeel state, Kianna still lives there with her husband, two kids, and a collection of well-loved vintage 80's Barbie dolls.

www.AuthorKiannaAlexander.com
Facebook.com/KiannaWrites
Twitter.com/KiannaWrites

A Sweet Way to Freedom

Piper Huguley

When Arlo Tucker stepped foot into the holier-than-thou Georgia hamlet of Winslow, all he wanted to do was profit from those who might want to have a drink in his good-time place. He did not imagine that, in their mutual loneliness, he would get all tied up with the new schoolteacher Missouri Baxter. He had a run of bad luck with women. They had some fun, but he surely didn't mean to get her caught up in the family way.

In 1910, schoolteacher Missouri Baxter will not go back to her home town with a big belly all by herself. Arlo needs to come with her—as her husband. With God on her side, she's got nine months to teach a most reluctant student an important lesson about what marriage meant to their people and show him "A Sweet Way to Freedom."

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Dedication

To George Claiborne Holt 1925 (?)–1980
Gingerbread Man, here's a happy ending just for you.

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I could not have pulled off this one without the help of two historical romance superstars, Evangeline Holland and Kaiaia Alderson-Tyson. You guys rock. Thank you so very, very much.

Chapter 1

1910
Winslow, Georgia

Schoolteacher Miss Missouri Baxter wouldn't say a word about who caused her belly to get bigger and bigger in front of the eyes of the Negro schoolchildren of Winslow, but everyone knew who it was.

Arlo Tucker.

"We going to get us a cousin," Missy heard the Bledsoe girls whisper to each other when they saw their schoolteacher starting to look like she had swallowed a watermelon.

She thought she could make it through the last days of school in May—just before school let out for the children to pick cotton. She didn't. She had to purchase a new shirtwaist to be let out to accommodate her burden. And she knew someone in this small town would want to know why she needed a new, and bigger, shirtwaist.

The moment had come, just as she was sweeping the front porch of the school to end the day. Missy had dreaded this day by turns, ever since she realized her shameful predicament. So she really wasn't surprised when Mrs. Lona Bledsoe had come to see her. She would be the one they put forward, in her capacity as the Sunday school superintendent, mother of the Bledsoe girls, and overall town know-it-all. On top of all of that, Mrs. Bledsoe was Arlo's older sister. Surely the town thought she would do something to fix the horrible situation Missy found herself in.

The heavily rotund woman, further along with child than she was, headed straight down the red dust track woven through the pine trees. Mrs. Bledsoe aimed her body right toward Missy and her broom with focused intent and purpose as the school day came to an end. Missy had been dreading this day, and this particular conversation. She could almost imagine in her mind what Mrs. Bledsoe was going to say. She had said everything to herself and went over it in her mind all the time. Maybe one time it would make sense to her.

For instance, as the head of the teacher committee, Mrs. Bledsoe had been reassured that graduates from Milford College were of the highest quality and character. Which was true. Milford College was the finest normal school for Negroes in all of Georgia. Missy had been their top graduate two years ago.

What was the first thing that the top graduate from the best normal school for Negroes did? Fall in a bad way. With slow-smiling, long-legged, high-yellow Arlo. The smoothest man she had ever met. What happened to that strong moral character? And no, it did not

matter that they were Negroes. Just because white people called them terrible names like jungle bunnies all the time didn't mean they had to act like it. Didn't she know Winslow was a Christian place? And what of Arlo?

Missy continued sweeping the front porch of the school to look busy. So many questions: What had they been up to just last fall? Why, she had just gotten there! And now that she was showing her burden, folks said, Miss Baxter was just as full of child. Why, there was even a money game going around as to when the babies would come. Like a competition.

Missy stopped sweeping to see the other woman's freezing gaze sweep over her, and let her look at her full on. She steeled herself. Inside she quailed, angry at herself, but she stood firm. She could understand—to a point. They looked about the same size and might give birth at about the same time. *Scandal*. And Mrs. Bledsoe was the married lady. Missy had gotten word from Doris Bomead who, when Missy first came, was willing to tell her anything about Lona Bledsoe, who couldn't "hold a boy."

Old Mrs. Bomead's words about Arlo's sister rang in her ears. *Who knew if Lona would get a chance again? Lona was a cursed woman since everyone knew it was a curse to be a Negro woman in this world. Who would wish that on anyone, and yet Lona had been blessed with four surviving daughters. What would she ever do with five? And her two dead baby boys. A shame before the Lord.*

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Bledsoe. How about a seat?" May in Georgia was when things began to get really hot. Mrs. Bledsoe lowered herself onto one of the rocking chairs on the school porch.

Just as Mrs. Bledsoe got comfortable and ready to open her mouth, Missy rang the bell. Fifteen pairs of feet scurried down the steps of the schoolhouse and ran off through the pine woods surrounding the school in all directions.

One pair of feet led the rest. Ruby's. The rebellious girl had tucked up her white dress creating pants out of them at the end of the day not knowing her mother was on the front porch. Missy's heart went out to the dear girl.

"Ruby Jean," Mrs. Bledsoe called out to the thirteen year old, her eldest daughter. Missy gripped the broom handle, hoping she hadn't made trouble for Ruby. "Take your dress out of there. Can't make a dress into pants. You the one graduating. Can't you see you need to be an example for the rest of the children?"

Ruby made slow deliberate movements to obey her mother. "I see it, but I don't like it. We should all wear overalls to school."

"That's perfectly ridiculous," ten-year-old Nettie told her. Nettie, who was on her roll as Garnet, tended to have a weak constitution, so

Missy indulged her more often than the others. It made Missy's heart beat fast to think of Nettie, joining her brothers in the graveyard. No child's life was guaranteed in this world.

"Mags," Lona called to eleven-year-old Mags, and Missy knew why. Mags, who was really Margaret, was as steady as the day was long. "Get your sisters home. Eat your snacks and do your chores. I'll be home soon after I have a nice talk with Miss Baxter here."

No point in putting off the inevitable. Missy sighed as she put up the broom. "Maybe we should go inside where it is cooler, ma'am."

Back home in Milford, it was no disgrace to have a baby and not have an Isaac Baxter-created wedding ring. Everyone loved babies back home. Every child, every time one came into the world, was a cause for a celebration, and merited a picnic or a barn dance at least. And if it happened before a young woman had that ring, why, that was no problem. They would be rounded up to marry beneath the big tree on the school green and then there would be another picnic.

The college formed the main industry of the her home town. Milford, Georgia was a place where you were expected to find your life's partner, find a vocation to uplift the race, and begin to plan a family that would do the race proud.

There was only one problem with that.

No one was expecting *her* to fall with a baby.

Missouri was the shining light, the pride of the Baxters. Her cousin, March Lewis, who also happened to be the women's principal of the college, held her up as all that was good and pure. Missy, as the very first B.A. graduate, would be the one to show the world what Milford College could do.

When the letter from Winslow came requesting a Negro teacher, Mrs. March Lewis summoned her in her official capacity—not as a family member.

"This is your chance, Missy. So many of us stay here, but you're the one who has been chosen by God to go forward into the world."

Her chance was just on the other side of Georgia in the most rural, backward hole of a town. Such a town was the very thing that Missy feared. She had lived in Milford for too long. She knew things were bad for Negroes elsewhere, but she had read about it in the newspaper. She did not want to know about it personally.

Still, as good old MC's shining light, she was compelled to go forth and spread the word about what the teachers and preachers college could do.

She loved her Winslow pupils very much. The children were eager and ready to learn. The twenty or so Negro children soaked up all that she could teach them, especially the Bledsoe children. She could tell that their parents spent time with them talking about their

world and reading to them from newspapers. Looking at those girls gave her hope for the future. There might be a day where they would not have to go to the mill and work or become laundresses, like Lona. They might make themselves as …well, teachers or maybe nurses. She was well on her way to helping to make this possible for them. Until she met him at the first Sunday picnic, since he didn't come to church.

Arlo Tucker.

They first bonded over the fact that Winslow was the most backwater, dreadful Southern hamlet that ever existed.

They bonded a little too tightly.

Which is how Missouri, the best and brightest of Milford College, class of '08, ended up where she was now.

With a big, round belly, too-tight clothes, one good shirtwaist, and little to no money to do anything else about it.

And now, she had to account for herself in front of the head of the Negro schools, Lona Bledsoe, who just happened to be her baby's aunt.

Missy helped her into an open chair, since sitting on one of the narrow pine desks would be hard for her, let alone Mrs. Bledsoe. "Your daughters are all doing splendid work. Such wonderful girls. So vibrant and healthy. And I look forward to graduating Ruby here in just a few weeks. What a proud moment that'll be for your family."

"Hmmm. Yes, it will. I didn't come to speak about my daughters. Not today."

"Oh?" Might as well get it over with. Missy's heart sank at what Mrs. Bledsoe was about to say and do. Better to meet it head on. "Come to compare bellies, then?"

"Certainly not." Mrs. Bledsoe drew herself up as if she were contaminated with something.

"I'm not ashamed." Missy gripped at the gray cotton skirt that she had let out as much as she could, careful to use the commanding voice she learned from reading poetry in elocution club.

"Well, I—"

"Look. I appreciate your concern, Mrs. Bledsoe. I'm making plans now, but it's a little hard when others"—she lowered her eyelashes —"don't want to be involved."

Mrs. Bledsoe fanned herself with a wayward slate that belonged to Charlie Thompson. "They say it's my brother's child. Is that right?"

No one had the nerve, until now, to ask Missy this question directly. Maybe Lona's own round stomach gave her the nerve to put it to her just that directly. Missy's hand slipped on her skirt a little.

"That's true. I was seeing him for a time last fall, if you remember."

"And ever since then?"

"Ever since then? Since Christmas break?" She folded her hands beneath her own growing belly to prop herself up. "He's been by sometimes. However, when I let him know about me…well, he's been scarce ever since."

"Oh!" Mrs. Bledsoe put down the slate and whipped out a hanky from her house dress pocket. "I wish I could say… You see, we came up a very hard way. Things have happened, unspeakable things. So, sometimes he doesn't know what to do. No one has ever put responsibility on him."

Missy folded her arms, troubled by the woman's words. "That's clear enough, ma'am."

"I mean, I don't suppose it could be anyone's but Arlo's?"

What? Missy gripped the edges of the desk. "I made this one mistake…just one. That doesn't mean that I'm up for others, Mrs. Bledsoe. I believed myself to be in love."

Mrs. Bledsoe turned from her, silent. "My brother is very, very special."

He certainly was. Everything about Arlo made her melt inside. Oh yes, looking back at it now in the good light of day, Arlo Tucker was trouble waiting to happen. She could not envision him in the neat parlor to meet her principal cousin March Lewis or the matriarch/ founder of Milford College, Miss Amanda. Oh, no. That old lady would call him trouble right off.

Yet his baby fluttered on soft wings of creation just underneath her heart, and was the most patient child whenever she talked to her pupils about world history and geography.

Oh yes, my little one, you'll go to places. You'll do the great things I didn't get a chance to do. You'll be the one to uplift the race.

She had made a dreadful mistake and wasn't about to make another one getting back together with trouble with a capital T.

Her knees trembled a bit and she held on more firmly to the desk. No. She had no love for that long, tall, high-yellow drink of water who acted as if his guitar playing and singing made him special.

She would not think of the languid way he moved. He always carried on about the good time place he had opened, serving liquor and playing his guitar with long strumming fingers. She would not think of his musicianship or his talk about uplifting the race. He was so proud he provided some escape for the mill workers of Winslow. She wouldn't hook up her heart to someone who spoke too loud and laughed too loud to know that he was a Negro, not when he should be quiet, lower his voice and keep his head low. No. That man was nothing special. A shiver ran through her at the memory of his touch.

You'll know better, my little one. I'll raise you to know better.

Her child wasn't due until August, maybe September, she guessed.

A late summer child. Maybe after that she could go back for a short time, to show her face… Still, what would she do soon when they expected her home in Milford? She just couldn't show up there with a round belly and a smile. She was the special graduate of the college.

But what about the baby? Would she be able to trust that anyone in Winslow would want to take in her baby while she went back?

She could take the baby back to Milford and say it was an abandoned orphan in Winslow, but no one, absolutely no one, would be fooled by that old excuse. She might as well show up with a big belly.

She just had to make up her mind that when her child had come into the world, she would go far away to teach somewhere else, and start over there as a widow.

Anything, anywhere to get away from Arlo Tucker. He was bad, bad news. But what was Lona Bledsoe saying to her?

The other woman finally spoke, unnerved by her silence.

"Please. Don't be angry, Miss Baxter. If you knew our background —where we came from, who our parents were—the shame." Lona Bledsoe turned from side to side, seeing if anyone else was there with them in the classroom. "No one knows about our family, and it's best that they don't."

What did Mrs. Bledsoe mean by that? Arlo never told her anything about that. A well of frustration rose inside Missy. Was it from the baby? "It's enough that I made the mistake that I did. I did it because I thought I was in love."

"With Arlo?"

"Yes, with Arlo. I thought we had a lot in common. Wanting to do things for the race. Wanting to see our people progress beyond the confines of a small-minded place such as this one. We talked a lot about those things."

Or she thought they had. She thought their commonality was meaningful to him. And yet he never said anything to her about the background that his sister referred to. What was that background? What did Lona mean? Could it have anything to do with why he didn't come to see her anymore?

"Oh, my dear. I don't know if Arlo is really capable of being in love with someone." Mrs. Bledsoe folded up her handkerchief. "Besides himself, I mean."

"I have come to that understanding altogether too late, Mrs. Bledsoe." Missy straightened some things on her desk and prepared to dismantle it for the weekend, so that the building could become a church once again instead of a schoolhouse.

A shadow across the doorway made the room take on a sudden chill in the heat of the day and she shivered.

“If there’s such a thing as falling in love, Missouri Baxter, I came close to it with you.”

At the sound of his deep voice curling about the room, her heart lurched in complete and utter betrayal. Missy stopped herself from turning around. Because with him being there, standing in the doorway with his sweet smile just for her, she might lose her resolve not to care anymore. She had been fine, just fine without seeing him for these months.

I can do it.

She formed the words of dismissal on her tongue and steeled herself to whip around and form them in her mouth, but they froze in the air. For the sight of this long-limbed, light-eyed, nappy-headed man with the slow smile and quick intelligence was still enough to take her breath away.

The words “Get out of here, you yellow cur” left her thoughts, brain, and understanding entirely. Just as quickly, unfortunately, they also came out of her mouth into the stunned silence of the schoolroom.

Oh yes. He was nothing but trouble for her.

Chapter 2

Arlo ran as fast as he could to the school house after Ruby and her sister came to his place in the woods to tell him what their mother had done. His vision of two women with big bellies fighting did not come to fruition though. He panted with relief when he reached the door of the schoolhouse and saw them in civil conversation with one another. *Whew*. But then Missy called him a nasty name.

Not like her at all, but not entirely unexpected. He had been down this pathway before, and always managed to negotiate his way away. Only this time, he didn't want to be away. What could he do to help her to see that he was here now, even if he had been away for a while before?

Arlo moved to her side, to be right there for her but she backed off from him as if he were made of fire. Made sense now that he had burned her. That's what happened to his women, no matter what his intentions. But he couldn't stay away from her. He wouldn't. "Missy, there's no need for name calling. Ruby and them told me what was happening and I came to see what I could do."

"Oh, Arlo." The words of disappointment came from his big sister, filling the space between him and Missy.

Why were the two women he loved most in the world coming together? "Sissy. You should be at home resting. Really. Why are you here?"

"I got up from my bed of affliction to tell Miss Baxter of the board's decision. We, we have to let her go when this school year is done." His heart lurched in his chest at this news.

"Is there no end of foolishness in this town? You all are going to fire her for something that's my fault?"

"I was there too, Arlo." He loved that she gave him a slight smile. Not all her memories of him were bad. That was quite a change. For him.

"Really. This is just disgraceful. What're you going to do about this?" Lona made it clear she didn't care for their exchange just now. But Arlo wasn't sure. Maybe the thing to do would be to take Missy somewhere away from this backwater gossipy town and set up his place somewhere else where folks weren't so full of judgment.

"Do?" Missy shifted from one foot to another. "I don't know if there is anything for him to do, Mrs. Bledsoe. You just fired me from my job."

Ahh. He had to give Missy that. She was not only the most beautiful woman he had ever met; she could use her mind quick enough as a counterpoint. The feeling of her curves responding to him

made him want to go back to those passionate times. She confirmed everything he thought about her when he first laid eyes on the schoolteacher last year. She was something amazing, like a bright star in the heavens.

"You paining me, Miss Baxter."

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Tucker."

"Anything? Nothing?"

She folded her arms, making her burden much more apparent. "For you to do."

Yes, the women always got like that. Eyes narrowed, arms folded, mouth all twisted up in disarray. They always started one way with him, with willing smiles and stolen kisses. Only later did they have narrowed eyes when things got too rough …and complicated. "I don't know about that, now. I may have a say or two in these things."

"Oh, Arlo," Lona said, a familiar refrain he had been hearing since he was knee high, "are you going to stand by this woman? Please say yes. I don't want her to lose her only source of employment."

"Stand by her? As I am now?"

"No, Arlo." Lona stamped a thick ankle on the ground. She really should be at home, not here getting up into affairs that were no concern of hers. "You know what I mean. I mean marry her."

"Marry her?" he echoed. He stood next to Missy, as his sister requested, not even realizing how tall she was next to him. Yes, something about her schoolteacher veneer made him want to take her by her thickened waist and…marry her. Right now.

Except her eyes, those dark eyes in her sweet, smooth brown skin —those eyes had already skewered him for a roast.

"I'm not looking to marry anybody."

Wait. Had he said the words or had she said them? The words in his mind came out from between her lusciously pink, teasing lips. The lips of a Nubian goddess.

"What did you say?" His sister's attention turned to the teacher now. Yes, Missy had spoken the words in his mind. Out loud. For his sister to hear.

What wounded more, that she knew what was in his mind already —even before he could think it—or that she didn't want to marry him? Was it possible for one thing to wound more than another?

"I said, I'm not looking to marry anybody." The sway of Missy's long skirt scraped the floor as she stepped from him.

Which wasn't what she'd told him. Oh no. That wasn't what Miss Baxter had said to him. Not at all. When had she changed her mind? And why?

Had someone else been courting the schoolteacher? And he ended

up on the losing end? Had someone else been at her house, enjoying her good cooking, laughing with her, talking about how the world was going to change for their race? A low-burning fire started in his belly and threatened to shoot out of him.

Then he saw it.

The slightest quiver. She quivered. For him. She was lying. She still wanted him.

A shard of joy pierced his heart and his chest filled out. Yeah, he still had it. The ability to make the schoolteacher quiver. Not in fear, no, never that. In something else. He still had it.

Now all he had to do was convince her. He was right and that she was…not. First things first. To be alone with her.

"Sissy. You really should be at home, waiting for this new one to come. You've not had it easy other times, right?"

"That was all before you came to Winslow, Arlo, and started up all of this mess. I wouldn't have had to get up to come down here to see what was going on if it hadn't been for you."

"Well, let's get you home. I'll take care of this situation."

He strode to his sister, grasped her by the arms to help her heave herself up.

"There's no situation," Missy said. "As a matter of fact, I'm glad both of you are leaving. Please don't misunderstand, Mrs. Bledsoe. If you have any need to come back and speak to me about the girls, please, do that anytime. But not about this. My circumstances are my personal business. Good day to both of you."

Arlo stared at her pretty lips uttering the condemning words. Did he have the right woman with child in his arms?

"Missy, I'm getting her home and I'm coming right over."

"No. There's no coming right over. You haven't been by in quite a while. I don't want you to come by now. No, thank you."

"Oh my." Lona shuffled herself to the door. "My dear, you must understand that we're only thinking of the best for the child. And yourself, of course."

He knew Missy had said it right, though. He'd never met a woman like her. Her mind was just so quick. Everything about her just shone, like a new penny in his pocket. Any man would want her to wife.

If he could keep one.

His hands started to leak sweat, and yet, as he eased his sister from the schoolhouse, part of him felt torn at the way he left her.

Yet again.

"Arlo, you've got to do better by her. Close up that place and marry her."

"Lona, you've been after me to close up my place ever since I

opened it. I provide a service for folks around here."

"It's a service of sin. Winslow is a Christian place."

"Winslow is a poky place that does just what the white man who runs it tells them to do. That's what Winslow is."

"It's Paul Winslow's town, named for him. He's got a right to say whether there should be sinning, drinking, and fornicating going on here."

"Did your husband John vote him into office? No, I don't think so. Paul Winslow is the head of this town because he owns the mill. That's all. And these Negroes down here need to learn that his being the owner of the mill does not make him boss man over me."

Lona looked all around her as she started her determined waddle back home. Arlo stuffed his hands in his pockets, wishing he could go back to Missy Baxter's for some of her succulent fried liver and onions. And her laugh. And her good talk when she taught him things.

Didn't mean he couldn't try. A man had to try.

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The teacher house stood off a little distance in the woods right next to the schoolhouse, and as he traveled to it, he thought her place was too tucked away. How would a midwife make her way back in here? Miss Annie, the midwife's name was. He asked around when he was open last weekend. He would check into covering her services when he opened up his good time place again. Folks would tell him anything with that good juice flowing down into their souls.

"Hey. Miss. I'm out here."

Nothing but silence greeted him for a long time. Then: "Seems like you've been walking through open doors all of your life."

Arlo went to her window and pressed himself up against it, looking in on beautiful Missy sitting in her rocking chair, warming herself by her fireplace. Her lovely hands were gripping the handles of the chair. His heart sank just a bit at the sight. "That's not true now, Miss. I've had some hard, hard times. Like right now."

A thunderclap sounded in the distant gray skies. *Oh Lord.*

Maybe if he sounded more like an authority…like old Paul Winslow, she would respond. Negroes still responded like crazy to a white man who talked like an old massa. No wonder old Winslow had no trouble hiring down at his mill. It brought back the good old days for a lot of folks. Just not for him.

"Going to rain out here, Missy. It's not the time to be out underneath the trees."

"It surely isn't."

He sniffed the air. She had something cooking in there. A rabbit, maybe some kind of stew. Something warm and tasty. A sweet smell of corn sliced the air open under his nose. *Help me, Jesus.*
~~~

"Got enough dinner to share?"

"Maybe."

"I smell cornbread cooking. How about you give me a square and we can start talking things over."

"When you ran out of here a few weeks back after I told you what was going on, you didn't take none of my cornbread in your hand then, Arlo."

Lord, how he wished he had. She wouldn't be mad at him and wouldn't stop him from having a square now. He could taste the sweet crispiness of it. Lona was a fair cook. His niece Mags was a better cook, but she was too young to cook all the time. But Miss Baxter, well now, her skills were something else again. "I'm here to take some up now if I can."

The rain started to fall on him. It was a light rain at first, but soon enough, fast enough, it got to be torrential.

Arlo frowned at the heavens. "God, you know this isn't right. I'm trying out here, as only a man can try." He pounded on Missy's door. "Come on now, Missy. Let me inside."

"Go on to your sister's house."

"Through this rain? I'll be soaked before I get there. And in all these trees, I might get struck down by lightning."

"It would be a sight more than what you deserve, Arlo Tucker."

"That's not fair, Missy. Not fair," he shouted out so he could be heard over the storm. The sun was starting to go down too. Great. He would be out here in the cold and the rain. "I just want us to talk about what's going to happen, that's all. We got plans to make."

He pressed himself up against her house. It had been a long time since he had the inclination to pray, but now seemed just as good a time as any.

Dear Lord, help Missy to see I don't mean her any harm. I don't know if I'm the daddy kind of fellow, is all. I can't do what I don't know how to do, when I never saw it before. And what if she knew about how I've been cursed? And I hurt her or the baby in some kind of way? Who would I be then, Lord? What kind of man would I be?

Maybe if he sang. He knew he had a fine tenor voice. "Sometimes, I feel, like a motherless child…a motherless child, oh, a motherless child…"

The lick of the song started to get good to him, standing there in the pouring wet spring rain with the sun going down. If he could sing good enough to help the rain stop, or good enough to let some sun into Missy's stubborn, proud heart… Either way, he would win.

Her door swung open and her rounded silhouette jutted out against the sheets of rain pouring in front of her.

"Get in here and dry off, Arlo. Nothing else. No food. No funny

business. Then get on about your way. I don't have any time for foolishness."

Arlo danced between the twigs and the leaves that layered on the ground. The rain tended to bring out the brown snakes, and he sure didn't want his life story to have a sad, sad end.

He stepped inside and she moved around him to shut the door. He removed his hat and a bunch of water dripped off of it onto her clean floor. Missouri made the funniest face—a face they would have both laughed at months ago before all this happened.

She handed him a towel, probably something they made in that horrible mill down in the main part of Winslow. "Don't drip on my floor."

"No, ma'am. I surely won't."

"As soon as you are dry, you be on your way."

"I heard you, ma'am. Just one trouble, though."

He had taken her by surprise. He could tell because she had a little perched-up eyebrow on her face. Good. The teacher shouldn't have the answers all of the time.

"What's that?"

"You have something that belongs to me. So, I can't leave right away, you see. Not till I get what's mine."

She must've had wings on her feet because before he knew it, she had reached around him and opened the door. With the strength of ten men, she pushed him outside into the rain. The heavens opened up just at that moment and water pelted him, harder and faster, as if the rain were made of small fists, punching him, beating him, showing him their displeasure.

Could it be any clearer that he was a bad-luck curse to every woman in his life? Did he really want that for Missy?

No.

Chapter 3

Five minutes. Ten. Twenty. He stopped knocking on the door after a while. Sometimes, he shouted out a plea like: “Getting mighty cold out.”

“Too bad.”

He was not giving up on her.

When her tin clock struck the half-hour, she opened the door. Arlo slumped into the doorsill, with clear drama, making much more of it than what it was. “Thank you, Missy.”

“You’ll not take your clothes off in my cabin.”

Oh yeah. She was plenty mad. Might as well have added, ever again, for all the times he had done just that. Arlo looked around at the tidy room that had been a home to him so recently. He sniffed the smell in the air. Just as he thought those things, his stomach gurgled loudly as if to fill the space of silence between them. He shrugged at her, but Missouri, as solid as the state she was named for, went back to her rocking chair, hands over her growing stomach, immovable.

“I’da been by, but—”

“You’ve been running that place, that den of iniquity you came to Winslow to run. Making these people in this town dependent on you for good times.”

“Hey. That’s no fair.” Arlo stepped forward, dripping onto one of her rose-patterned carpets. She cut him with her beautiful eyes. Ones he had stared into many a time.

“It’s perfectly fair. I’m trying to bring something of value to this community and you, with your drink, destroy it.”

“You didn’t mention dancing.” Arlo smiled. *Come on, honey.* She always had a small spot, just a small one for him. She would forgive him. Eventually. He just had to hang in there with it. He didn’t want to face her mad anymore, or the time when she would find out about how cursed he was.

“I don’t hold with dancing, Mr. Tucker, but I see no wrong in it. You play good music. They have to go somewhere to hear it. They could drink sarsaparilla.”

“There’s no money in sarsaparilla, honey lamb.”

“Is that all this town is to you?”

Well, yes. He wouldn’t have come down to this God-forsaken place to just hang out. What man didn’t need money? That’s what made Paul Winslow rich. He came here and decided to build the towel-producing mill closer to the cotton fields. A man saw a moneymaking opportunity and made the best of it.

Better not tell Missy that, though.

She said nothing, but went to her cookstove and stirred her stew then dished up a bowl of it. She opened the oven and pulled forth what he thought he smelled: corn-batter cakes, ready to dip a spoon down into that savory broth and soak up some of that goodness for eating. Nothing like a talented woman.

Missouri put the bowl and one hot cake onto a place at the table. Arlo had to refrain from rubbing his hands together. Looked like beef. Beef was his favorite, although it was mighty hard to come by. How did she get a hold of some beef for stew? The smell of the tender meat, potatoes, and veggies reached his nose and nearly drove him insane. "Where you get some beef from?"

His mind surveyed the residents of the small town, but he couldn't think of a man with beef which would be willing enough to put his feet up under Missouri's table, or one free enough to.

He watched her as she bustled around, making the place at the table nice and welcoming, arranging this and that.

Then she sat at the place. Ignoring him.

He spoke into the silence. "Looking mighty good there."

She bowed her head, clearly enraptured in prayer. There she went. What was wrong with these people? Missy hadn't even been here that long and she was all caught up in it herself. Maybe that was why things didn't work out between them.

Things didn't work out because you made it that way.

A man had to be able to be free. Pure and simple. He would do right by what was his, and now he could see what her situation was and how the town was. Missy surely wasn't going to starve. Women never did. She dipped her spoon down into the beef stew and ate an entire bowl before he could turn away to look from her. Where did she get those kinds of eating skills?

Probably cause she ate for two now. Might be his son tickling around in her belly, wanting to get that nourishment. He moved from warming himself in front of the cookstove as she rose gracefully to get another bowl for herself.

"Your family. Even if Lona took it upon herself to fire me, at least John Bledsoe cared enough to offer me some beef to eat."

Something struck him in his gut. The kindness of his brother-in-law was legendary. Still, he felt a pang in his gut that he should have been the one to get the beef for her, and John's gesture was more like a scolding to him when he was a child.

When I was a child, I spake as a child. When I became a man, I put away childish things. What? Where had that come from? Why did he remember those words?

"You going to eat that whole pot of stew yourself? You look mighty lonely at that table by yourself."

“I’m fine, thank you. Just figuring out what I need to do.” She took a bite down into one of those crispy corn cakes, and the crunch she made connected with his stomach juices and made them flow. Lord, smelled like she put just a touch of sugar in there this time. Some didn’t hold to that, but clearly, Missouri Baxter was her own woman. His heart warmed at the sight of her. His woman. He cleared his throat.

“I’m going to do right by you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Take care of you and my son.” He sat himself down into a chair at her table and tried not to mind the piercing look she gave him.

“We don’t know if it’s a boy. And I don’t want your ill-gotten gains made off of people who resolved to temperance, but couldn’t because you offer up good liquor at cheap prices. Children come to my school with hunger in their bellies because their fathers drank up all of the money and there was nothing left for breakfast. I got used to buying flour to make biscuits to take to school for something to give them so they might concentrate on their lessons. So no. No thank you. None of your blood money.”

“It’s not for you to say, Missouri.”

“It’s everything for me to say, Arlo.”

Was that a shine of tears along her eyes? He was nothing but trouble for a woman. Again. “I don’t see how.”

“I gave you a chance. And you didn’t take it.” She faced him, licking some of that good beef gravy from her spoon.

“That’s all a man get from you is one chance? You let a man get cold out in the rain and don’t offer him no hot stew, and that’s all? You like the rest, Missy. Thought you was different.”

She put down her spoon. “The rest. You mean there are others like me? Ones you offered to stand by?”

He opened his mouth. And shut it. “Not exactly. There’s no one like you, Missy.”

“You know what I’m saying.”

“Maybe.”

Missouri folded her arms. Again. “I need to know if this child has blood in the world that’s not you. That way, my child can know he or she might have family they can count on.”

“Two that I know.”

“Two. And what are they?”

“Girls.” He screwed up his face and wanted to spit, but knew Missouri would push him back out into the rain if he dirtied her floor.

“What’s wrong with girls? They can’t travel around doing what they want as easily.”

“Yes. They always have to be cared for.”

Missouri laughed. “No one is caring for me that I see. Not even the Negro part of the town of Winslow.”

“Hey. That’s not fair.”

“It’s perfectly fair.” She soaked her cake in the broth and dipped her spoon in it to eat on.

“What you going to do, Missy?”

“What I do and where I go is my business. Look like you are drying off, so you need to get on about yours.”

“I told you—”

“Yeah, that my child has blood in this world. Sisters. Thank you for that information. How old?”

“One is five. The other’s two. Five-year-old is Kate and two-year-old is Addy.”

She nodded. “Five years old. About Emerald’s age. This one will be the age of Lona’s baby.”

“No need in bringing up my niece.”

“Oh, that makes Kate real to you? So sorry to remind you of your obligations. No, Arlo. I want nothing from you. Just as you so desperately seem to want, you are free. Please leave.”

“Listen, I got to tell you…”

“What? I’m sure your family got nice beefsteak cooking for you at your sister’s house. Someone like you will never want for a place to be. Lots of pretty girls here in Winslow who work down at the mill and are looking for a good time. All you got to do is ask.”

His hands itched, but not for the usual reason. Unclaimed women had made him feel that way before, but this time was different. No, Missouri’s little speech and how she was always, always teaching him something in her voice made him be still and think. “Don’t want none of them.”

“Can’t believe you would grow up that fast.”

“I’m not interested in no one but you.”

“I don’t like the way you show your interest.”

That was it. Her words left him flatter than one of those corn cakes she was crunching on with her stew. He wasn’t going away that easy.

“One time, you used to like it fine, Missy.” He stood up, went to her to tuck some of her soft hair back behind her ear.

She didn’t move. A bad sign.

“That was one time.”

“You forgot?”

“I’m trying to every day, but my body won’t let me. I have a little something to remember it all by.”

He moved behind her, to hold her, but he could see wet circles forming at the top of her striped shirtwaist. All because of him. This is

what it meant to love someone, to willingly take her pain into himself. He'd do it too, just to help lessen his pain when the inevitable happened and he caused her more pain. He leaned down to whisper in her ear.

"It don't have to be this way, Missouri."

She kept her arms folded over herself. "I'm afraid it does, Arlo. Glad you came by and are all dry now. Rain's stopped and you can get on home and away from me."

"I'm coming back."

She rubbed herself. "Unfortunately. I'm growing kind of large and can't do anything about that. But I would rather you didn't. Just stay away from me. Us. We'll make it fine without you."

When she stepped away from him, the cold wrapped its arms around him again and he made his way to the door and opened it. "You know how to make a man feel like he needs to go."

"Well, when I made a man feel welcome in my cabin before, he sang me songs. Told me pretty words with sweet guitar music. And left me at a time when I needed him most. So I figure, if I can get along fine at a low point of my life, I'll make it."

Without him. Two words never seemed so big or empty before. "You going back to Milford?"

"I can't. They all think I'm a great big success. I've got to think of some reason, some illness about why I can't go back for the summer now."

Arlo snapped his fingers. "The consumption. No one will want you around."

He faced her, and her mouth turned up in one corner with a smile. "I should have known to ask you about the proper disease. Thanks."

"So you staying here?"

"I think I will. I have some money saved up. I should be all right until the baby comes in September."

"Then?"

"I'll think about that then. Can't think about it now."

"Missy, I grew up without a pappy and I don't want that for this child. I'm not as bad as you say. I'll do for this child."

"Long as it's a boy, right? Should I ask Kate and Addy's mothers about how and what you do? No. You might want to get on to the spool-winding room of the towel mill to see if there are any young girls who are interested. Only, everyone here in Winslow knows how you do. Including your nieces you seem to be so fond of…"

He shrugged, striking a funny pose. The last thing, nearly the very last thing he wanted was her hurt. That was the reason why he had to stay away from her. "Their mothers. I got to tell you about them. Then

you can decide if you want anything to do with me."

Her smile disappeared and her bottom lip quivered. "Why wouldn't I? I need all the help I can get. I'm all alone in the world in this."

"That's not true."

He went to her and embraced her, awkwardly from the side, as if he didn't know how to hold her anymore. Missouri didn't move. Didn't turn her body to him, didn't respond in any way.

No use. Didn't she love him just the least little bit? But if she didn't want to listen to what he had to say…what could he do? All of his bad luck was hard to take in, even for himself.

Dropping his arms, he moved to the door, opened it, and stepped through into the steamy late May night, feeling as roasted as the beef in the stew.

There were times when freedom felt humid. Sticky wet, with a heaviness inside of him, just like the small, wet circles on Missouri Baxter's shirtwaist.

Chapter 4

When Arlo left, Missouri wanted to sit in the chair and have a good cry. But she couldn't do something so wasteful. That was not the Milford way. Instead she filled a bucket with water from the pump, warmed it, and scrubbed the soot from the front part of her fireplace. There. That would show him.

The knock on her door startled her. She thought maybe he had come back. The hold on her heart slipped a bit and she felt herself relenting. Maybe he did care just a little.

When the door swung open, it was Miss Annie, the town midwife, and her new assistant, Missy's sole graduating student, Ruby. "Good evening, ladies."

Miss Annie fixed her gaze on her with old, cobwebby eyes and sniffed the air. "The daddy been here, hasn't he?"

"Why, Miss Ann, I—"

The old lady must have come up to her waist or thereabouts, but she grasped Missy's wrist with an iron grip. "Don't let him make you mad, 'cause this child needs watching. You understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Missouri's Baxter upbringing gave her no room to say anything else to this woman, who had been a slave for a good part of her life.

"We coming to check on you. Baby boy born tonight over there by the mill, so we checking around on all the other babies hereabouts while we out."

Miss Annie hobbled in, and an eager Ruby trotted in behind her with a graceful gait. The girl's light-colored skin and black hair brought to her mind her uncle's complexion. Would a daughter of hers be that color, or something else because of her own deep brown skin?

She patted the girl on the shoulder. "You have a new teacher now that you are getting all graduated."

"Yes, Miss Baxter, I do."

"How are you liking it so far?"

"Fine, ma'am."

She refrained from embracing the girl. The child had a fine, quick mind. Missy was happy to see it being put to use in some way that was not the mill. Still, she couldn't help but wish there was a high school in town, or at least nearby, for Negro children. Ruby would gain a lot by it if there was, but Missy knew the Bledsoes wouldn't be able to afford to send her. Sometimes, a body had to know when to be quiet about raising such possibilities. Especially when they were about to become relations.

She patted the girl's rounded shoulder. "Good to hear that. Where

do you and your capable assistant want me?"

"Get yourself over on the bed. We'll wash up our hands to see how you doing. How you feeling besides fighting with the daddy?"

"Seems like this baby accommodates to everything I'm doing."

Miss Annie shook her head. "No. What you gots to understand is that baby is just going along with what it think you want. You the mama. You got to be in the mind that you got to do what that baby needs. And it needs you strong, whole, and fighting. Not pining after the daddy."

"I wasn't pining. I was cleaning."

Miss Annie used her iron grip to lay Missouri on her back, but she couldn't breathe and had to lay on her side.

"Trying to get him to do right by you? Well, honey. Sometime that happen. Sometime it don't. He don't do right by you, we all going to love this one as part of this here town just the same."

"Some love. I was fired." Getting the words out made it more real. It made Missy feel better to face the truth of her situation in Winslow.

"Child, you going to be all right. You the most smart one in this town. We need you to help put our children on the right road of this life. You done set up this one here right. Winslow ain't got no sense about you, then there's other places, other ways. Trust in God. He'll see you through."

She blinked her eyes fast, not wanting to cry in front of Ruby. The girl was still her student, technically. She turned her face to the wall as Miss Annie's bony fingers poked and prodded at her. Miss Annie spoke gently to Ruby about what she was doing and what she hoped to see.

Miss Annie shouted out into the room, not just speaking to Ruby anymore. "You want to know what the baby is?"

She whipped her head back. "What're you saying?"

"You want to know if this child is a boy or a girl?"

"You can't possibly know that."

"I knows. I always do. You want me to tell you?"

If she knew, she could tell Arlo. If it were a boy, maybe he might stay around more. No more running off for weeks at a time. No. But, what if it were a girl, and she told him and he left her completely alone as he must have with Katie and Addy's mothers? Her heart, her training, or maybe it was her body's changes, betrayed her. She didn't care what he did.

"No."

Ruby's eyes took on a hurt look. The girl looked down at her feet, even as Miss Annie barked a sharp command at her to get to the sink.

"Baby moving right?"

"It does. Several times a day."

"Good. Keep track of what that little one does. It goes still, you send Ruby to get me and we going to figure it out. It's not good for you to be here alone, as you getting on in the way, you know."

"There's nothing I can do."

"There's always something to be done, child. You the teacher lady. You figure it out."

"He won't come here."

"Did I say anything about that old daddy? No. That's completely up to you if that's what you want."

"Thank you."

"We going now. You stay on that bed. Get your rest. Take care of that young one."

"Yes, ma'am. Good night. Good night, Ruby."

She could barely hear the girl's soft voice respond to her as they left the cabin. Missouri turned over. Miss Annie was right. How in the world would she get someone to come and stay with her, when she needed help? Maybe going home was the best way to deal with this. There would be an uproar, but she wouldn't be alone.

Please, God. Give me an answer, a way to deal with this soon. For the sake of my baby.

She hoped He heard her prayer.

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Missouri knew that people didn't think she would show up to church with her big belly poking out, but she needed the solace of a building where, five days out of the week, she had fulfilled her dream of becoming a teacher. Now that the dream was at a near end and they didn't want her back, she could still have the reassurance that it had happened. So, a few days later, bright and early, she took up her reticule and walked the short distance into the bright morning to enjoy God's blessings of the day.

Approaching the church, she wove the strings of her reticule with her fingers. All of a sudden, the little building where she had spent a good portion of her year seemed strange to her. Doris Bomead, one of the leaders of the community, eyed her as she approached the building. Missy went to her, remembering how they had spoken before. "Good morning."

"Hmph. Is it?" the heavyset woman said.

"Yes." Missouri folded her shawl over her, sensing a chill in the June air. "All is well in the Lord."

At that point, the Bledsoe girls ran up to her and embraced her, leading her away from the seemingly enraged Doris Bomead. Was the woman's anger about the baby? About her sin?

"Uncle Arlo wants to see you," Mags said. She was already taller than her older sister, much to Ruby's dismay. That was the way things
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happened sometimes. Life wasn't always fair and didn't keep to an order, Missouri often told the children.

"He does, does he?"

"He surely does. He told us to come and get you."

What was Arlo up to? Using his nieces to plead his case?

Instead of returning to the church, the girls led her off to the creek that ran next to the church, the so-called First Water that the church was named for and where all the baptisms took place. Arlo sat there on a pile of rocks, smiling that smile at her that made her heart leap. Every single time.

"Come here, sugars." He gave each of the girls some money, a coin of some kind. Missy couldn't see how much. They each ran past her, in turn, grinning at their ill-gotten gains. Ruby was last.

"Thank you, Uncle." Ruby said in a snappy voice that wasn't like her and flashed Missy a shy, hopeful smile as she passed her by.

Yes. Missouri folded her arms over herself. She was trying not to smile in Arlo's presence, lest he think it was about him. Ruby had a deep admiration for her uncle. So sweet. Good thing she was too young to really know him.

"Aren't you going to thank me?"

"For what?"

"For slaying that old dragon, Doris Bomead, for you."

"No. We were chatting."

"She was passing judgment on you. I bet you she's the one that put Lona up to firing you. Lona wouldn't have done that if she had been in her right mind."

Missouri put her hands on her hips. "Why isn't she in her right mind? Because she's with child?"

"Yeah. All the time. Now you…"

"You don't need to insult me anymore. I'm going to church."

Arlo grabbed her by the arm. Missouri turned around, watching the retreating backs of his nieces as they ran through the thinly wooded thicket to the white-painted church. "Look. I want to apologize for the other day."

"Apology accepted."

He laughed, showing those pretty teeth of his. "That was quick."

"You need all of the grace I can give you."

"Look." Arlo's voice got real serious. What could he say? Every time he was with her, she felt like a fool. He had conned her good, and there was nothing to say. She was caught. He wasn't. End of story. Just like Kate, Addy, and whoever else's mothers. "They not approving of what I do either. We're out here in God's church. Together."

"Nice try. That's made for people like you."

"Don't be mad. I told you from the beginning I was bad luck."

“What if the baby were a boy?”

“Huh?”

The expression on his face changed, as if someone had hit him in the head with an anvil. She thought so.

“You want to see what I’m having before you do something. You’re willing to ‘do right,’ as you say, for the mother of your son, but a girl…” She whirled around, wrenching herself from his hold. “I need the comfort of the Lord this day. Not you. Excuse me.”

He followed her, making protests, but she stomped off as quickly as she could in the hot June day, ignoring the tears that were coming down her face. The sweet strains of a piano tinkling reached her ears. Bob was playing a hymn, barely able to keep the refrains of the Saturday night good time place from the melody he was playing, but it was still a good hymn.

Ignoring all the stares, she slid into a back pew and whipped out a handkerchief. Trying not to be obvious about it, Missouri dabbed at the corners of her eyes, which were running free, like the nearby creek.

She put a hand to herself. She would be fine without him. She didn’t need him. God would take care of them both. But how?

The air moved and a shadow appeared in the row. Maybe the Bledsoe girls were coming to her rescue again.

No.

It was their uncle, hovering in the aisle. “Is this seat taken, ma’am?”

He pressed in on her knees. His physical presence was so overwhelming she nearly couldn’t breathe. There seemed to be no air in the church at all. And the music, the tinny minstrel show melody Bob had laid on top of “Shall We Gather?” had stopped.

Everyone in the church had stopped to watch this little drama unfold.

Was Arlo coming to claim her?

True to his form, he was leaving the decision to her. Once more.

She stood and edged herself past him. “You can sit wherever you want. I’m not sitting with you.”

“Missouri, sit yourself down. Come on.” He grasped her hand in his warm one and pulled her next to him.

“I don’t want to sit with you.”

“This is the place where all of us sinners go. Near the back door so we can be cast out quicker.”

Despite herself – her anger, her hurt, and pain - a small bubble of laughter betrayed her deep in her soul. She let it go into the quiet.

A frown crossed Doris Bomead’s features. Missouri held up a hand, waving at her.

“You’re nothing but the very devil, Arlo,” she whispered to him.

The saddest expression crossed his face. “That’s what they all say in the end, Missy. Trying to save you from the hurt and pain of all of that.”

He dropped her hand and turned from her, staring out of the window into the June day. What was it that she said?

Was Arlo’s reluctance to marry born of something else she didn’t know about?

Chapter 5

Church. The place where God and old witchy people like Doris Bomead hung out. The nerve of her to give Missouri a hard time. Probably never had a man cozy up to those ham-hock thighs of hers in her entire life. For a past Arlo, she'd have been someone who could solve all of his problems. Except he would be selling his soul, and he didn't have no more soul to give that way. 'Cept to one person.

Missouri. The smartest, most beautiful and dignified woman he ever met. When she had trembled in his arms, her heart shone in her beautiful eyes, so open to him. That was the closest he had gotten to knowing real love.

And it scared him to death. Arlo Tucker wasn't worthy of that. Might as well keep on keeping on. Here and there, they always wanted a good-time man around. Get a little place set up, serve something to drink and people would come around for miles.

Except Missouri had taken all the fun out of it. He had known the things she told him, of course. But he really didn't understand how it touched others—until her.

Every move that she made, everything she did was a way to show him how to be better, how to do better. The big man up above had sure put her in the right place when he made her a teacher, because every time she came near him, she taught him something new. And just like anything else, her teaching him caused an itch, an itch that meant something different in his life.

It never occurred to him about what happened to the people after they left his place. He just gave them their drinks, got their money, made sure they had a good time listening to the music he and his friends made, and they left. Never occurred to him that some of those men, or even Doris Bomead, who was a regular visitor, had someone at home to think about. After all, he didn't.

He just thought they made the same choices he made trying to keep life simple and easy.

And she made a point. Life since those two little girls got more complicated. What was he when he fussed over, his jewel girls, as he called his nieces, but didn't have Kate or Addy to fuss over?

Was the hot June day getting to him? The teachings of this insistent, dignified woman? God? All of them? He lifted an arm to air out his shirt a bit. She turned to him, first frowning, but then, seeing what he needed, she shifted a little.

"I know you hot if I am."

"I'll be fine. You can get some more air if I just move away a little."

Did she want to move away? Was that what that was about? Had she forgotten so quickly how it had been for them?

As soon as he thought it, he could see her point. Had he forgotten?

Naw. He hadn't forgotten. None of it. Like that sorry white man who called himself him and Lona's daddy, and how he never was there for them. Every time he thought of that man, he wanted to curse, but he was in church now. He would hold out.

Or hold on.

He lifted his arm and put it up and around her shoulders and drew her to him. He wanted her heat near him, needed to know her warmth, the warmth that made a home for their son. Her eyelashes fluttered up at him. Her smell that was like oranges and pure Florida sunshine moved over him in a wave.

He might have sighed if he wasn't in church. Missy was amazing, far more amazing than what he deserved. Did she deserve to be hurt by who he was? He could take no more pain. God, it would kill him if he promised himself to her and something terrible happened to her.

But he couldn't resist her. He needed that warmth.

He reached over and squeezed her shoulder, kneading it with his fingers just a little. Just to let her know he was there and wouldn't go anywhere away from her.

She shook her head at him a little. Arlo gave her half a smile.

"Stop."

"No. You don't like me touching you?" His voice went up a bit. The squeaking caused old Bomead to look back at him with a frown. Lord, he knew that woman was one who had an itch for him. But he had a new way now. He would never cause some hurt to Missy.

"No," she said.

"You lying. Up in the church. For shame."

"Arlo."

Now Ruby looked back at him, smiling at his insurrection. Yes, that niece was the one most like him. A troublemaker. She'd better be careful though. Girls had a harder time of it when they made trouble.

Look, I know it's been a long time since we talked, but watch out for that girl child. She got a piece of me in her and she going to need someone to come on and look out for her. Her mama ain't going to do it and her daddy got his hands full with the others.

Was it meant to be him, with this coming child? What would that take? What would it mean for him? "Love," the minister intoned, and Arlo couldn't do it. He couldn't keep from rolling his eyes. Was the minister going to go into the whole love made the world go round thing? Love thy neighbor? Be Christian? Missouri squeezed his knee.

He winked at her.

Shaking her head, she withdrew her hand fast. Nope. Couldn't get to shake her from what she believed. Admirable. A strong woman. No fear in her. Good thing she had taught the girls, but it was all over now, thanks to him. And his sister couldn't help. Lona was too busy lying up having babies for John, trying to get a son for her husband.

Give them a son, Lord. Please. So my sister can be all right in her body. And mind.

Still, now, because of what they had been up to, Missouri wasn't the teacher anymore. A pang invaded his heart at what Missouri had already been through. Just proved his point. Things happened to the women he was involved with. Lord help the one that he loved. He wasn't any good to any woman. Best thing he could do for her would be to get up, walk out of this church, and never return.

No more running now. He had been running too much. Too much running made a man weak, and he wasn't weak. No. Not ever since he stopped drinking up his profits. He would stay and take up his part in it too. She deserved his support in front of old Bomead and the others who would judge.

"Some say love made the world go round."

"Amen, brother," Arlo said, and Missouri's eyebrows flew up.

Yeah, old minister love it when they get encouraged to go on and speak their foolishness.

"When that which is perfect comes…tell me about it…when you know what is perfect for you…the rest. I said, the rest needs to go on away."

"Amen," Missouri said, and she sat back away from him.

He nodded at her and smiled. It was getting good to her too.

"Because yes, say it with me, those of you who know… When I was a child I spake as a child, but when I became a man, I put away all the childish things…"

Missouri's pretty pink lips recited the verse right along with that old minister.

Those words again. Did it mean it was time to shut his place down? If he did what would he do? How would he do?

Unless he went and hired himself out as a field hand to his brother-in-law for his prosperous farm. Arlo shuddered remembering those first few months when he came to Winslow, working to get a few coins to rub together for the good-time place. Lord a mercy, farming was some hard work. He didn't envy John none. John did well for his family, but that just wasn't him.

Wasn't nothing left for a man in Winslow but the mill.

The mill. The place where people offered up a bit of their soul every day in exchange for some coin from old man Winslow. The very definition of hell.

He turned to see Missouri's eyes shining while she listened to the minister, taking in God's words. Her skin glowed with health and the pounding blood of their son beat within her. His skin warmed to know of the task that she was doing. It was time to put away childish things. Past time.

"If anyone, anyone wants to come forward into His house, His divine presence, His love, step into the aisle. Just step into the aisle and let God's light lift you up into His paradise."

Yes he was.

Arlo pulled her to him and said, "We're going to work this out. And you're going to be happy. Got me?"

"What're you talking about, Arlo?"

"God is speaking to my heart this morning. Trust me, it's all going to be what He wants for us."

He reached down and tasted her sweet orange lips, drew in all of the good sweetness of her. It had been so long since he had kissed her. Why had he waited so long? What had made him want to wait? Missouri was worth it, worth every bit of closing his place and of going into the mill and inhaling the deep stink of lint and burnt cotton into his lungs. He would work under the whip of that Satan, Paul Winslow, and know he was doing it all for the cause of his son to come into the world.

He stood up. "A man from Aleppo said, send me, Lord!"

Instantly, Ruby shot to her feet and started clapping. "Praise Him! Praise Him, Uncle Arlo!"

The minster looked at him from under his eyebrows. "We have a soul for the church today?"

"Yes, I'ma be a soul for Him. Yes indeed!"

The minister took a handkerchief and mopped his brow, but said nothing. Why? Arlo was offering him this chance and the man didn't take it? What kind of minister was he?

"Well now. I'ma have to take this under advisement with the council."

Now Arlo was the confused one. "I want to be saved in the way of God. Why does the council have to be convened for that?"

"Because you." The minister cleared his throat.

"Can't have no sinners up in the church!"

Was that Doris Bomead? She was willing to condemn him in front of everyone?

Arlo went past Missouri's knees, even as she grasped his hand. He squeezed her hand, to let her know it would be all right.

He stepped into the aisle, the place where the anointed walked in First Water Christian, and worked his way up to the front of the church. "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone. How is it that

there is silence now that I'm trying to mend my ways in His house?"

He could hear the brook babbling outside the open windows of the country church. Instead of feeling comforted by the brook, he smelled a stench of something rotten. "All souls are not welcome in God's house? Is that it?"

The minister stepped forward. "Why don't you meet me for some talk and we'll discuss this together?"

"Well, I cannot believe that my soul isn't good enough for this church. I don't believe I've ever seen—"

"Are you sober, brother?"

"Are you saying I would come into God's house with liquor on my breath?"

No one said anything. Not a single one of his regular customers who would have been with him last night if the place had been open. Not one.

Ruby was still standing. She believed in him. Blessed child. Still, now, tears were running down her face. Rather than cheering for him, she felt sorry for him. And he could endure almost anything other than that.

Yeah. If Lona had been here, she would have stood for him in the Lord's light, but without her, they felt free to reject the offer of himself to God. Just as his father had rejected him. Just as he rejected Katie and Addy.

It was too much. He stomped up the aisle, as if to get the truth stamped into the ways of the church, and out of the door. He wasn't going back until God got it right.

Chapter 6

Missy knew Arlo loved his niece more than just about anyone. She could tell by the look on his face as he left the church, watching her with tears streaming down her face at the way his offering before the Lord was rejected. There was no better way than to celebrate Ruby's graduation time than to create a tableau for the girls to perform in. A moving one. And as it was just about the forty-fifth anniversary of the end of enslavement, what better topic was there?

It took her most of an evening to write the parts for the script and to set it down, but Missy did it. She was a little bleary-eyed at school the next day, but she handed out the parts. The Bledsoe sisters, even little Emerald, all had parts to play. It was easy to center it around them since they made up about twenty-five percent of the students. After recess, they rehearsed their parts, and Ruby was thrilled.

After they ran through it once, Ruby asked her a question. "Why wouldn't they let us marry in slavery times, Miss Baxter?"

"Allowing them to marry would have meant that the slaves were people. And one way to keep slavery going was to treat them as if they were less than people. So then you don't let the slaves have the fullest human treatment. You let them have something that looks like it—jumping the broom, for example."

"We use a broom to clean, not jump," Nettie pointed out.

"Yes, dear. But jumping the broom also showed the intention of setting up a house together. The broom has long stood for domesticity, home and hearth." Missouri smoothed the girl's braids down checking on her as she did so. She just wasn't as strong as her sturdy sisters.

"Are you going broom jumping with Uncle Arlo?" Emmy asked.

"Hush." Ruby gathered her sister to her. "Don't stick your nose into something that isn't our business."

Missy gave a wry smile. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have these lovely young women as her nieces? Her coming baby would be a cousin and playmate to them. Maybe.

"Come over here, Emmy." Missy couldn't put the young child on her lap, but she slid onto the school bench next to her and put an arm around the girl.

"Just like me, one day, you'll leave your home. It was hard to leave Milford, but when they told me that in this place they needed a teacher to teach beautiful girls like you four, I couldn't resist. It made me miss my mama and papa. But I know God sent me here to Milford for a reason."

"Yes. To marry up with Uncle Arlo and get him on the right road," Mags added.

“No. To show you four there is a big, big world beyond Winslow. There’s more than this mill.”

“There’s nothing more than the mill.” Ruby’s face was downcast. “That’s what everyone say. Even though Papa doesn’t want us there.”

“He’s right. There’s more to do in the world. One day, you might leave here and come back across Georgia to Milford, get educated, and show some other children in the state that there’s a big world out there. It’s just time for me to go home. That’s all.” She shivered at the prospect of her father seeing her belly, and tears stung in her eyes. They would be so disappointed in her.

“You are the best, the very best that this school has ever had, Miss Baxter. I don’t know if it’s right for us to let you go so easy,” Ruby said. “But at least I got some of your learning while you were here. These ones, I don’t know what will happen for them.”

She shook her head. Dear Ruby. Always looking out for her sisters. “You make a way. There’s such things, like high school by correspondence. You can get what you need if you come to Milford.” She gulped. “If you have to work in the mill for a while, study at night to get your diploma. There are schools for Negroes to build themselves up. You don’t have to stay here. There’s work to be done to help our people.”

The little girls were held spellbound. And she sat back and rubbed at herself again, a gesture she couldn’t help these days. This little one seemed so at peace in the bosom of its family. Missy insisted, “I know you can do it. You can help.”

“And who is going to help us? If you aren’t here?” Ruby shook her head, and Mags patted her on the shoulder.

“There are other teachers in the world. They’ll come and you’ll learn from them too. Didn’t I come?”

“You did, but it took years,” the practical Mags said. “Years and years.”

“Then you help the younger ones until someone comes. And when I go back to Milford,”—Missy searched for the right term—”I’ll send someone. Remember, a door may close, but a window will open. You’ve got to have faith and trust in the Lord. He’ll provide.”

“Mama is just mean and hateful.” Ruby kicked at the floor with a well-worn boot.

“Now, now.” Missouri lowered her head, eyebrows coming together. “Anyone knows what your mama is feeling these days, it’s me. You mind her. She’s got a lot on her mind these days.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Ruby gave the rote response, but Missy could see the fire in her eyes. Ruby was not at all pleased, but she didn’t know what to say to the child. She had to leave, but Ruby had to live with her mother. She wouldn’t dare cause Lona trouble.

“Honor thy mother and father—remember, children. Go honor them now. Get on home. And be back here in the morning for the ceremony. Thank you for keeping me company.”

“You welcome.” Emmy hugged her. She hugged the child back, tears flowing freely. She cried so easily these days.

“Go on now. Don’t dawdle.”

“If we see Uncle Arlo, should we say anything to him?” Ruby didn’t miss a beat. Bless her.

“Tell him to make sure he shows up at your graduation. Bright and early.” Missouri patted the girl on the shoulder and watched the group of sisters trudge home.

Yes. So you can tell him what my heart cannot say.

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Horses, wagons, and carriages of all kinds pulled up to the little wooden school the next day, and Missy felt a thrumming in her belly that was not the baby. She had not realized the draw that the graduation ceremony at First Water School would be. She was enacting her problems with Arlo for the whole world to see, so much against her nature, but she had to let him know how she felt. If her words and feelings came from the mouths of his nieces, so be it.

And he was on time. He was there as Ruby’s parental figure, since John did not dare leave Lona at home alone for too long in her condition. Ruby seemed somewhat disappointed, but her uncle being there made her happy.

He wore a tan summer suit of a light fabric that she had never seen before. His slick brown hair was combed back from his hairline, and he smiled and greeted everyone as if he were co-hosting the ceremony. People were always taken aback at his friendliness, but that was the way he got through life, with a song and a smile. Her heart surged. What would he think of her tableau? She stepped forward, trying to suck in her growing shape, but unable to do so. She waved her arms to get their attention.

“Welcome to our ceremony. Before we begin the ceremony, we have some history to show you, with a tableau. Children.” She moved to the back, ready to let the action happen.

The group of children came forward, arranging themselves in three groups, lined up along the front of the classroom. The first group featured Mags and Ruby as slave masters, striking the chains of liberty from a slave. The next grouping was Nettie as a bride with another little boy and Emmy as a preacher, marrying them. Another child came forward, who would explain the tableau. The little boy moved to the end where Mags and Ruby were, and spoke as loud as he possibly could.

“Once the chains of liberty were provided to the people, we were
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free."

Mags moved and the chains fell from her hands. Ruby raised her hands in vindication.

The audience clapped and whistled, and from her vantage point in the corner, Missouri could see that Arlo was more enthusiastic than most at the sight of his nieces as the center of the tableau.

"At our liberty, we strove to do as people did. To vote, to live, to be free in this world as a people!"

The child then lisped the words to Frances Harper's ode to freedom, "The Fifteenth Amendment." He nearly got it all right, too. Miss Frances would be mighty proud of the boy.

Then the child moved to the next part of the tableau. "When our people were in chains, they could not marry. One of the first things they did was to take themselves to the courthouse, or better yet, to the preacher."

The audience laughed.

The child tried to talk above the hoots and laughter, but Missouri gestured to him to let the moment pass and to be patient. Fortunately, he did what he was told. She breathed out. This was an important part.

"Getting married before God showed everyone that we could be people too in the eyes of the world. Getting married made our families strong and whole and complete again. Without marriage, we are weak. There is no certainty, only darkness and sin."

Nettie fell to the floor, as she was supposed to do, but her frail countenance alarmed her uncle. He stood up.

Oh no. Missy didn't mean to make him feel alarmed about Nettie. He looked over to her with desperation in his eyes. She waved a hand to show him Nettie was all right. It was part of the tableau.

The child carried on, reciting some of Harper's love poetry: "To Mr. and Mrs. W.F. Johnson on their Twenty-Fifth Wedding Anniversary" and "Advice to the Girls."

Did Arlo hear what was being said? Did he know what was in her heart?

Nettie got back up, and the child groom and small minister Em cleared away. Ruby came back forward with another small child. Ruby held herself straight as she spoke. "Families make us strong and whole as a people. When we have our families, we have love and support."

Ruby and the small child arranged themselves as a mother and child. The narrating child began to recite Harper's touching mother-child poem, "A Mother's Kiss."

Everyone in the ceremony got very quiet. Missouri heard a sniffle or two.

She felt on the verge of tears herself, thinking of what it would mean to kiss her own child.

Arlo didn't budge. When the child was finished, everyone burst into applause, and Arlo clapped the hardest and longest of anyone.

Ruby stood up and waved, asking for quiet. The community, which had so lovingly lavished praise on her, stilled to hear her. "Thank you for coming to see me graduate today. I just want to say that none of this would be possible if it weren't for the love and care of our teacher, Miss Missouri Baxter. I understand that she'll be leaving us soon, but I hope and pray that's not true. She makes Winslow a better place, by illuminating us in our ignorance, and I pray that she stays."

Em came forward with a bouquet of wildflowers picked from the woods. Missouri stepped forward to take it. Arlo gave a sly smile and nodded.

"Thank you so much. I've enjoyed my time here in Winslow, teaching your children, and giving them the strength, courage, and dignity that we deserve as a people. Please know that as I continue to new journeys in my life, I'll always remember this school and its inhabitants for several reasons. Now. For what we all came for. Ruby Jean Bledsoe. Step forward, please."

Missouri put her flowers down, reached behind the podium to hand the girl her diploma, and then leaned in to give her a kiss. Her uncle came forward and embraced Ruby. The girl's face went pink with delight.

John Bledsoe came through the door. With great big strides, he came up the aisle and embraced Ruby, who was still at the front of the room. "Honey, is Miss Annie here? Your mama needs you all now."

"Now? On my graduation day?"

"Seems so. Come on."

Ruby hurried up the aisle. Miss Annie got up on her cane, moving up the side aisle, ready to go to Lona's aid. No wonder they had to hurry; Mrs. Bledsoe was on something like her seventh pregnancy. They didn't have much time.

"Well," Missouri said. "There's cookies and punch to celebrate and congratulate our graduate, but it seems that life and its obligations have whisked her away. Thank you for coming."

In the rush to get to the cookies and delicious drink she was providing, she noticed that Arlo had taken his nieces back home to await the outcome of Lona's delivery.

Missouri said a small prayer and looked around the empty classroom, littered with the refuse of the ceremony. A crashing and hurried end. The end of her time in Winslow. She was no longer a teacher.

She grabbed a discarded copy of the tableau program that she had carefully copied out to hold on to as a remembrance. She would never forget this place. Nor Arlo. No matter how hard she resolved to try.

Chapter 7

A tightening of his stomach caused him to do what he thought was the right thing. Round up the girls, and get them home to their mama.

What if something happened to Lona? She had been through this so many times and made it through. Still, what if it was her time to go home to God? Just as with Ruth and Mary Anne?

Lona was all he had left. Something happened to her, he would just fold up.

Except that wasn't true. He let the reins in his hands slacken just a bit. He had more than Lona as family now. He had his nieces and Katie and Addy and…Missouri Baxter. She was family too.

She ain't none of yours just because she carrying your son. Not yet.

Somehow, the old way of thinking crept in, but it didn't work. Something in him rebelled.

Missouri's warmth, her graciousness, sparkle, and strength showed him something else. Some other way to see things. Some other way to be.

The mule knew the way to Lona's house, so he didn't have to guide it much, and Mags was doing a great job carrying for the little ones—frail Nettie, who still had on a bridal veil, and thumb-sucking Emerald.

What would they do without their mama?

Another sickening feeling hit him in the middle of his stomach. Was this how Katie and Addy's mamas felt about their young lives without him? They were just about the age of Emerald. What did they do in their lives without any parents?

Well, didn't he know himself? His and Lona's daddy was some white man, their mama a prostitute. You survive. However, you have to. Find love wherever you can find it whether it's good love or bad love. Certainly, he had found enough bad in his day to know.

The mule stopped right in the front yard of the Bledsoe house, and Lona's pitiful moans caused Arlo to leap off the wagon box.

John came out of the house with a halfway alarmed look on his face. "What you all doing here? Everything all right?"

"I brought them to see their mama. You know. Just in case if…" Arlo swallowed hard, not able to speak the unthinkable.

John clapped a hand to his shoulder. "They don't need to be here. Ruby and Miss Annie have this down. And you…you look bad."

"Thanks, brother."

"No. I mean, you don't need to be here hearing this. I been through it enough with her to know, but take the little ones on

somewhere. That's how you can best help. They need something to do."

"Are you sure? What if something happens to…sissy?"

His brother-in-law guided him out to the front. "We'll be fine. Go on. Please. Don't come back until it's dark."

"Come on, sugars."

The girls piled into the back of his wagon again. John leaned into his daughters. "You be good for your uncle. Stork's bringing a baby to your mama. When you all get back here, there be a fine baby for you to see. Go on with your uncle now."

John turned quickly and went back into the house.

Arlo slapped the reins onto the mule in relief. Well that was something. He surely didn't want to cause any trouble, but he thought the girls should be at home at such a time. Where should he take them? Certainly not to his place. That was no place for girl children.

The mule started stepping back where they'd come from, and he guided him there. That was it. To the schoolhouse. Back to his Missouri.

"Where we going?"

"Back to the school."

"Oh goody! We might get punch, after all," Nettie said.

Yeah. He had kind of snatched them away from getting the treats after the ceremony. Another sinking feeling. Was it ever easier being a parental authority over young ones? Did the guilt ever go away?

When they pulled up to the schoolhouse, it was quiet but the door was open. When they stomped up the stairs, he couldn't believe his eyes. Missy was pushing on the school benches to get them back to the right place.

"You shouldn't do that." Arlo ran to a bent over Missy. "Come on in, girls, and help."

He helped her onto one of the school benches.

"What're you doing here?" She regarded him carefully but didn't look like she hated him. That was progress.

"I thought to take the girls home to their mama, but John said to take them somewhere until dark."

Missouri laughed. "Yeah, he doesn't need them underfoot right now."

"I'm sorry I ran off. I thought if something happens to Lona, the girls should be there."

She peered at him and put a hand on his arm. "Nothing's going to happen to her. Miss Annie and Ruby have the situation in hand."

Everyone says that. Everytime. "Look. I'm sorry I left out so quickly, but I was worried."

"I understand. Worried about Lona. Not me."

“That’s not true. I knew you were fine.”

“You did? Do you always know that?”

Missy had a way of putting it that got straight to the matter. Rather than press that wound of hurt, he turned to see his nieces hovering in the doorway and back to Missy. “How can we help?”

In a few minutes, they had the schoolroom put to rights and the girls were munching on leftover wagon wheel cookies and drinking the last too-sweet dregs of the punch. His cup would have benefitted with a shot of something, but he didn’t want to think about what. He wasn’t that man anymore.

They sat to take a break after the girls went outside to play for a bit. He took up her soft hand in his to see if she would snatch it back from him. She didn’t. He had to keep himself from tapping out steps to a new song on the palm of her hand. Maybe he still had a chance with her after all.

“Thank you for coming back to help. I appreciate it.”

“I’m glad I did. Seems like my steps were guided here. I loved your play.”

“Thanks. I’m glad you did.” She lowered her head, then looked directly at him. “Look, I need to get a few more things and then I’ll pack up the teacher’s house. If you want, you can stay and help me carry some things out of the teacher’s house to the station. And help me eat up the last jars of things so they don’t have to get left behind.”

“They would keep. Where are you going?”

“Well, Arlo. I’ve lost my job. I have to go somewhere.”

“I understand, but where?”

“Back to Milford, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“Don’t know where else to go. I thought of staying here and getting a job in the mill.”

“No.” Arlo didn’t care how rude he was. He would throw himself bodily across her to stop her from going in there and making old man Winslow richer. “You’ll die if you have to work in the mill.”

“I need a job. Not much else for Negroes to do here in Winslow.”

“I need you to be here. As my wife.” He reached over to her, trying to get her to see his way. “I could get a job in the mill.”

She pulled her arm away, regarding him with those keen eyes of hers. “No. I wouldn’t have it.”

“Why not? I’m not cut out for farming.” Her insistence confused him.

“You would die in the mill.”

He shook his head. “I’ve been thinking. The life I been living, Missy. Kinda like dying. Thought opening up a good-time place would help me with my music, but I’ve been playing less and less these days.

It needs to be shut down."

"Are you serious about that, Arlo?"

A light shone in her eyes that was so heavenly, it gave him pure pleasure to see it. "Yeah. I'm looking to do better."

"You're willing to give it all up and go to the mill? To support us?"

He swallowed. "Gotta put away childish things."

"I don't know what to say."

"Say yes. Be my wife."

She withdrew from his hand and stood. "I don't want you under those circumstances."

"What circumstances? We'll be fine." He picked up her hand and kissed the smooth warm brown side.

"You need to be somewhere to do your music."

"I need to be somewhere to help my babies and you get a foothold in this world. That's with you." He slid to the floor in one smooth motion and got on one knee. "Missy, I want you to marry me."

"Come on. Bring the girls to my house. I'll give them supper. They can help out there too, and we can think about things."

"Yeah, and you'll accept my proposal."

"Come on."

He watched her keep her posture as she walked out of the schoolhouse to call to the girls. He proposed. Isn't that what she wanted? Was she putting him off, getting ready to say no? His heart clenched up at the thought of losing her. *Not again.*

When they got to the teacher house, she and the girls fixed a meal with an assortment of canned goods that Missouri had been given as part of her teacher pay. A kind of crazy meal: pig feet, peaches, green beans, beets, tomatoes, potatoes and some kind of canned bread. A little strange, but fun. He brought out his guitar and played a while so they could enjoy the music, but then he saw dark was approaching. "John said to bring them when it got dark. We got to get on to see what's going on over there."

"Yes, you surely do." Missouri stood, clearly ready to say good night to his nieces.

"I want you to come too." Arlo grabbed her hand.

"I don't want to intrude."

"No. Just come on. Help me. I'll bring you back home after I've dropped them off."

The puzzled look on her beautiful face transformed. "I'll accept that. Thank you."

They all piled into the wagon, and Arlo let the mule take his time to get on back to the Bledsoe house. When they did, all was quiet. A lamp shone through the darkness. The cry of a little baby issued forth

and they all smiled at one another.

Thank you, dear Lord.

He leaped down and helped Missouri down first then lifted the girls down one at a time. John greeted them at the door. Arlo had never seen his brother-in-law's face so broken up. His heart thudded in his chest. He gripped Missouri's hand just a bit harder.

"John, is Lona…okay?"

"She fine. The baby's fine."

Arlo beamed. "You get that son you been wanting?"

John angled himself to face his daughters. "You all go on in and see your beautiful sister."

"Oh, it's a girl again," Mags piped up with pleasure. The little ones ran into the room too quick for Arlo to see what they thought.

"No wonder you crying, John," Arlo said.

Missouri elbowed him.

John gave him a look. "You never seen a baby come into this world, has you?"

Arlo almost stumbled on the doorsill, knowing what his brother-in-law was saying. "No. Can't say I was around to see." *For a reason.*

"Then if you had, you would know why I was crying. She's beautiful. I don't care what Lona says."

Ruby stepped out of her parents' bedroom and came to embrace Arlo. "She's a pretty one, for sure."

Arlo's heart thudded more as he peered into the bedroom, where his sister was propped up. Her face was all red, the baby in her arms. "She ain't happy?"

"Mama got all of that foolishness going on about a boy. I love my little sister. I'll look out for her as if she's one of my own."

Arlo doffed his hat and went to the doorway of the bedroom. "Hey, sissy. Looking spry there."

"Yeah? I can't have no boy, that's for sure. Got another girl here."

She moved the blanket to show a round, cream-colored face. His heart surged. Yeah, the light color showed up again. Curse of their daddy's blood in them both.

"She kind of favors you, Lona."

"That's her problem, then, isn't it?"

He felt Missouri's light touch on her arm. She said, "We brought the girls back. Your baby is lovely, Mrs. Bledsoe."

Her head lowered at Missy's words. Poor Sissy seemed uncomfortable at Missy being so nice to her. He was glad to see Lona back down when she said, "Thank you. I guess. I was so sure this time. God got a plan, though. We have to see it through."

"Surely. I don't want to intrude. I'll ask Arlo to get me on home."

"You don't have to run off. This will be you soon, Miss Baxter."

Missy lowered her head and folded her hands, backing away from the scene. “I’ll carry her on home, and Miss Annie too. I’ll be back soon.”

John came to the doorway. “Don’t know what to call her. We just about out of jewel names.”

“Ones we like,” Lona said. “We’ll have to call her something else. Break the streak.”

“Oh, don’t do that,” Missouri said. “I have an idea. How about Cordelia? As in King Lear? It means heart of a jewel.”

“Cordelia,” Lona said. “I like how that sounds. Maybe with May for her birth month.”

“It’s June, sissy,” Arlo pointed out. Had she lost her mind?

“She supposed to come in May,” his sister said, giving Arlo a look that told him he better get going.

“I like that fine.” John shook Missy’s hand. “How good it is to have the teacher here when my child was born. Thank you, ma’am.”

“Glad to help.”

“I’m ready to go,” Miss Annie said. “Cordelia May sound like a mighty fancy name, but you all will make it plain after a bit.”

Missy took the arm of the midwife. “No need, Miss Annie. She’s a pretty little thing. Who knows what she will be one of these days?”

“She a colored baby. And she’ll be right there in the mill or married to a mill hand one of these days.”

Arlo helped the ladies into his wagon. The truth from the old lady disturbed him. Even if he didn’t like it. That was the problem with girl babies. They couldn’t go nowhere in this world and didn’t have any kind of way of getting around life. Wasn’t going to happen to none of his. No way, no how. Even if it meant spoiling his Missouri—he would treat her so good and fine—a boy couldn’t help but make a grand entrance in this family now. He just knew it.

Chapter 8

"Oh Shenandoah, I long to see you, Away you rolling river. Oh Shenandoah, I long to hear you," Arlo sang.

Oh yes. He was gifted beyond all reason with his music. He didn't belong in the mill with that voice, his talent. How could he even think of going there to support her and the baby? Arlo's honey-soft voice wrapped around her, almost making her feel sleepy as the mule trotted them home in the smooth June darkness. He had many talents, part of the reason why she loved him, but they weren't suitable for all ears to hear.

"Away, I'm bound away, 'cross the wide Missouri." He smiled wide at her as he wrapped up the first chorus of the song, singing it extra loud because her name was in it.

"You better watch it," she said. "I'm getting wider and wider these days, and might not want to hear that part of the song."

Arlo was just about to respond, she could tell, when another voice from the back of the wagon jumped in. "Whoo whee, that boy can sing the birds down from the trees. I can't say as I blame you none, Missouri. He's something. Still, folks want to know when you all going to go on down to the courthouse and get this all over with. I needs a new pipe for my stove and I'm hoping to win so I can get one."

Arlo slapped the reins on the mule, just a little bit to help it on. "Miss Annie, after you brought me a beautiful new niece, you know, I would be happy to give you a little change to help you get that stovepipe now."

"Ain't you the sweetest thing. Naw, your sister and brother paid me for my services of bringing another girl up in there. Glad they felt thataway. Sometimes, men be awful in how they do you if you bring another girl when they want a boy."

"It was all right by John, so, praise the Lord. It worked out as they wanted."

Missy felt a chill cross her. "What do you mean, ma'am?"

"Oh, child. Mens just get a certain way whenever they know they have a son. That's all."

Missy folded her shawl over her and shrugged down into her clothes. Yes. She understood all of that. It was most unfair.

The mule pulled up into Miss Annie's yard. The old lady announced, "I'll be praying for you, child."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"You want me to help you on down there, Miss Annie?" Arlo asked.

"Naw, you slick-tongued devil. I have it. Go on and take this one

home. She be needing her rest, and someone to take care of her while she do rest. And a kind word every now and then, you hear me?"

"Yes indeed, Miss Annie. Thank you."

They watched the old woman cripple along into her house. They stayed silent as the mule automatically started to take them back toward the teacher house.

Missy wished she had some kind of scoping lens to be able to see inside of her to know what her child was.

Still, it didn't matter. Tomorrow, she would begin packing everything to get herself back on to Milford and leave Winslow behind for good.

What a difference a year made. Memories shifted through her mind.

When Cousin March called her into her beautifully paneled wooden office she told her this little place needed her, needed her light. When she met Arlo for the first time and he gave her his sunny smile and played the guitar just for her. When she heard first those guitar strings weaving back and forth, he had her heart clenched firmly in his fist at the first strum. And now, she would have his baby. Whatever it was. And she would be whoever she was in raising it.

"What you thinking 'bout, Missy?"

He didn't really want to know. Arlo just liked to fill up the silence. He didn't like for anyone to get too down in the dumps—the perfect personality for a good-time place owner.

"Been a full day, that's all."

"It is. Proud of my nieces."

"They're wonderful girls." Then, because she couldn't help it, she added, "I bet your daughters are wonderful too."

He pushed his hat back on his head and looked around. "I'm sure. They mighty young, though, and don't know much of anything."

"They're yours, Arlo. That's what makes them special. Or maybe they have their mothers' ways too."

He chuckled a bit, and something in her wished she hadn't said that, wished she hadn't reached out to him, flattering him like that. She clutched her fists tighter on her shawl. She deserved nice words too—hadn't Miss Annie said so?

She had always been too giving, too connected. It was one of the reasons Cousin March Lewis had hesitated in sending her here. But the principal went against her own inclination, and now look. She was right. Missy was too giving and she was too connected to this town, and look at where it got her.

His face went downcast. She wished she hadn't brought up the mothers. They were probably colorful peacocks compared to her plain peahen self. Arlo Tucker could have any woman he wanted, and

clearly, he often did. That didn't mean Missy had to be reminded of her competition.

"They don't have mamas."

"What? What do you mean?"

The mule pulled up obediently into the front yard. Arlo stopped it, not seeming to be in a rush to get her inside.

"They gone to Jesus, Missy."

"Both of them?"

He gave a wry smile and shrugged. "Yep. Both of them. Young things, just like you. I ain't no good for any woman, Miss. That's what I been trying to tell you 'bout them."

"Did they die having the babies?" [

"Katie's mama did. And Addy's mother, she…she took herself on away from here. Just after the baby."

The pain he must have felt at those losses sent her into herself. *Dear Lord.* In all the months they had been together, he'd never put it that way before. Never sought to share the reason why he held himself from her, why the product he sold in his place brought him comfort and distance. Now she understood how he had honored her with his proposal.

He slowly nodded. "I know what you thinking. Lots of folks think thataway. Having my baby is just bad luck all around for any woman. And I wouldn't have nothing for you, Missy. Nothing but heartache and trouble."

He put a foot up on the wagon bar. "I tried to stay away from you. I tried so hard. I knew what had happened before, but you…you were different. I like hearing the way you talk, and the words coming from your pretty lips. You telling me things I didn't know about before, teaching me about the world, even though I've seen more of it than you, just, giving to me all the time."

Her heart warmed. "You did that for me too."

"And you still want to touch me."

"Why not? You're a part of me, Arlo. Now and forever in my life, no matter what happens. We'll always be a part of one another."

He put his hands on her shoulders and faced her. "Like I was a part of Katie and Addy's mamas?"

"No. That's not what I'm talking about. I mean in our hearts." She patted herself. "Yes, this one here will always be a part of us, but here. In here. You made me a better person. You made Winslow special just being you."

"Yeah, I agree. I feels the same. I come here with the wrong way to see things, trying to see about how I could make money fast for them girls without doing it right. Lord knows, I didn't want to be up under no one's thumb. So when Lona told me there wasn't no good-

time place here, I came and opened one. Nearly drank up all of the profit myself. Never thought of it as a chance to be closer to the drink."

"And it was."

"It was. Then you come with all of your school teaching and I started to think about what I could do, where I could go beyond my place."

Her gaze met his. "What would that be, Arlo?"

"I'll play my music somewhere. Somewhere on the street corner if I have to. I'll make people listen to me."

"They will. I'm sure they will."

"First, I've got to provide for you and the baby. So I'll get a job in the mill. We'll see how it goes from there."

Missouri lowered her head. "I know you would rather die than go to that mill."

"Actually, it lets me know what's going on in there. We got to know. And I would rather go in there than my nieces or you. I'll do anything to keep them out of there. Or you."

"I don't care what other people say, Arlo. You have a good heart. You're a good man."

"And you. Missouri. You the best." He leaned into her and their lips touched. She didn't realize that she was still fully in possession of her feelings when he kissed her. All of her emotions went to her fingertips as she slid her arms around his neck and pulled in closer to him.

He didn't taste like alcohol today, just this smooth, masculine taste of him, purely Arlo, and nothing in between them, nothing at all.

His kiss made the world slip away, and she knew nothing but this moment of wanting to be with him and stay with him, always. Yes. He surely was very talented in a lot of ways. Slowly and regretfully, she untangled her lips from his, but staying close, always, with their heads touching.

"You ain't given me an answer to what I said at the schoolhouse, yet."

"Come inside to find out." When had she gotten so bold before? She needed one more thing from him…just one more.

"Aww, honey, you know I couldn't love you any more than what I do."

And she knew it was true.

He came around to the side and lifted her down from the wagon into his arms. And sliding against him, she kissed him again. He pressed himself to her, and when they parted she smiled into his face. "I know you don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but we are part of one another, just like we said, right?

“Yes, honey lamb.”

“Then, where are your daughters?”

Arlo peered down at her in the moonlight. “Lord, Missy, you are something. I thought you was going to say no, we can’t go to the courthouse and help Miss Annie win her bet.”

“That was the next thing,” she told him.

He laughed out loud. “Their grandmamas have them. One in East Chattanooga and the other up near Franklin. That’s who I send the money to.”

Her eyebrows came together. “Arlo, those babies are sisters, and shouldn’t be raised up apart from one another. They should be with you.”

He got quiet for a minute. “You have a point. But I knew I couldn’t put those girls on Lona with all she got to deal with. I was roaming the countryside all that time until I just came here. That’s no good for girl children.”

“No. But I can be. And now that I don’t have a job and…”

“Yeah. I know where this is going, Missy. You putting that little ceremony into the play and all. Yes. We’ll get married just as soon as you say. You want my girls, I’ll go get them from where they are and bring them here.”

“We can be a family, Arlo, but you never asked. You told me.”

“Missy, will you please, woman, please be my wife?”

He wasn’t on his knees this time. And she should make him go there. But now, he was less theatrical. Right now, she believed he was speaking from his real heart and that was what she wanted. “Yes. I will.” Missy reached up and pulled him close to her, because she wanted it. But the way he pulled her in close to him, as close as he could, made him know he wanted it too.

“One more thing. I want a family, Arlo. I’m not having good thoughts about those girls being separated from one another.”

“I understand. Let’s talk about it after I put up the mule.”

She turned from him and went into the house. *Praise the Lord.* Her cousin wasn’t going have to die of shame to see her without her wedding band on. She would have one. Well, she already did. It belonged to her grandmother, forged by her legendary blacksmith artist ancestor Isaac Baxter—a cousin of hers somewhere. It was Milford tradition that he forge all of the wedding bands for anyone who married there. She wouldn’t be married there. But she had one, nonetheless.

Missouri reached for the dresser drawer where she kept the ring. Touching the smooth, cool metal, a stitch of pain in her right side cut deep into her lungs and she nearly stopped breathing. What?

Oh God, the baby was coming.

Much too soon.

Chapter 9

He almost had to stop himself from humming when he tied up the mule in the barn shelter behind the teacher house. He hadn't felt so relaxed, so good in years. It was almost like the time when he first set foot away from home, young and feeling good about the possibilities in the world. Still, the events that had happened over the past five years had changed him. He was almost pulled down so he couldn't rise up. With first Ruth going on him and then May Ann checking out, through no fault of his own. But he found his way back through Missouri.

Thank you, Lord.

Her scream cut through the night and liked to stole his breath away.

Dear God. That cannot be… He had just left her.

He turned and ran into the house to see Missy gripping herself.

She was panting, like a slop hound dog. "I feel so strange, Arlo. A pain in my side. I don't know what happened."

Peace came over him. Why now? How strange, given everything that had happened to him before. How could he feel peace in this terrible moment when the woman he had just resolved to marry was falling ill in the same way other women in his life did? What held him up? *Put away childish things…*

But he was calm. He guided her to the bed and helped her to lie down.

"Keep calm, Miss. You getting upset will only get the baby upset, and you don't want that. It's going to be okay."

Tears ran down her beautiful brown face and ran into the corners of her mouth. "I don't understand it. Why this? Why now? Why my baby?"

Or mine. "You stay here and I'll go get Miss Annie. It's going to be all right."

He couldn't stop to re-hitch the wagon. Instead he threw himself on the back of the mule and took the worn dirt path back to the old lady's house they had just left not an hour before. Almost as soon as he pulled the mule up into the yard, a light came on from her kerosene lamp.

"Hey there! Someone having a… Arlo! What you doing here?"

"Something wrong with Missy, ma'am. She went to gripping on herself as soon as she got home."

"I'll get my things. Don't you have the wagon?"

"Didn't want to stop to hitch it up, ma'am."

"I haven't ridden bareback on anything in years." Miss Annie eyed

the mule with suspicion.

"Don't worry. It'll be okay." He slid down to the ground, ready to lift her up.

And him saying it made it so. What had happened to him?

The old woman seemed to take forever to get her things. Thank the God above that she had not disrobed yet. When she stepped to the mule, he lifted her up and put her squarely on the front part of the animal. Miss Annie squealed and giggled as if she were a young girl Ruby's age.

"I got to ride on this animal with you?"

"'Fraid there's no other way."

"By the time we get on back to the teacher house, I might charm you from Missouri's arms."

Arlo jumped on the animal's back behind her and reached around the soft, doughy midwife to grasp the reins. "You just might. Let's go."

"Not too fast, though. I got rhumatiz."

Arlo had no idea what that meant or why it should matter in this case; he just wanted to get back to Missouri.

Even with Miss Annie's warnings and squeals in his ear, they got back to the teacher house fast. He lifted the midwife off the mule to help her into Missouri's house.

Somehow Missy had changed into a nightgown, but she lay on the bed looking frightened.

"What's going on, girlie?"

"I felt a terrible pain across here." Missy pointed out places on her stomach.

"Feeling it since?" Miss Annie's old fingers went to poking and prodding at his future wife.

Dear Lord. Let her be fine. Help the baby, Lord, and let them both live this time.

"A little."

"Yeah, I thought so. That baby is trying to come. Make a party to join its cousin."

"It's not time yet."

"I didn't think so. 'Less you counted wrong and you carrying big. Nothing to do for it but wait it out. A child might not be coming tonight, but you got to stay off your feet. Good thing the school year is over. Stay on your back for as long as you can. No funny stuff."

She turned and eyed Arlo, her glance at him softening. "I'm needing your sweetheart man to give me a ride back. Me and Ruby come by to see you every day."

"That's all you got to say?"

"Honey, there's nothing else to do for it. Your job is to keep that baby inside you for as long as you can. Got to give it a chance to

grow. Your man will come and get me if anything happens. Won't you, Arlo?"

"I surely will."

"Yes, no riding in the bumpy wagon. Just bring the mule, like you done tonight."

"I'll do my best to accommodate you."

"That's fine. He's going to be right here with you." She turned to Arlo. "No leaving her alone anymore. Don't know when her time will come. It still may come soon, but every day the baby stays in there is good. She can get out of bed for the chamber pot, but she got to get right back in as soon as she can. You got that?"

Arlo nodded. His mouth was dry and knees nearly crumbled to bits with relief. *No more curses.* Was God giving him a second chance? It surely seemed that way. He'd take it.

First chance he would get, he'd hang a sign on the door of his place in the woods. "Closed." He had another job to do.

Missy moaned and turned her face to the wall. "I was supposed to go to Milford in the morning."

Miss Annie shook her head. " You go some other time to your people. Less you want to give up on that baby, you ain't going nowhere. Arlo done said he's going to take care of you. You'll be fine. Take me home now. I got to get my rest." Miss Annie fairly pranced out, saying, "I'ma get my stovepipe yet."

When Arlo got Miss Annie to her home, she gave him a tin of salve. "Rub this on her belly twice a day. Once in the morning, once at night."

"Yes."

She grasped his hands and forced him to look at her, and he pushed down a feeling of irritation. He had to get back to Missy. What did the midwife want from him now? "This a tender time. Everything you do for that girl will say whether that baby wants to be here or not. If that's what you want, you've got to make up your mind. It can't be about you. It's got to be about her."

"Yes, Miss Annie. I got the sense of that."

"Sense of? You've got no sense, that's for sure. You look like the devil himself must look, but you can't be like him. No way, no how. You don't do right by that girl, I'll make it mighty uncomfortable for you to stay in Winslow."

"It's going to be okay. Just like I told her."

She let go of him. Arlo opened the tin to sniff the salve. The sharp scent of the ointment made him feel as if he had been punched in the nose. "She really needs this?"

"If I say she does."

A dark thought entered Arlo's mind. "Getting your stovepipe isn't

part of this, now is it?"

"I do as God tells me and mind the rest. You would be smart to do the same, young man. Get on back to your woman."

Arlo was only too happy to oblige.

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The next day, when Ruby and Miss Annie came to visit on their rounds, Ruby brought his grip and his guitar. With that, his move from his sister's house to the teacher house was official.

He bent down to kiss her round cheek. "My lovely niece knows me so well."

Ruby pulled back and touched Missy's forehead. "How are you feeling, Miss Baxter?"

"I can't say. I don't like being in this bed much." His woman's frown touched him and made him ache in his middle. He would do anything to bring her smile back.

"Ruby brought the guitar, Missy. I'll play."

Arlo strummed on the guitar and they sang a rousing few choruses of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." Missy sat up in bed, and clapped and sang with them. She might have been getting better because of their visitors, who helped to see that she got better, but he liked to think it was the music.

Over the next few weeks, people heard that Missy was sick and had to stay in bed. Still, he was surprised that people came. Well, he knew John and his family, except for Lona, would come as they could. But they didn't have to worry about cooking. Folks came and saw to it that they both had food to eat to keep their strength up. And it didn't even matter if the people were his former customers; they came and didn't appear to judge him or Missy.

When the minister came by one day to pray, Arlo took him to the side afterwards.

"Will we be able to marry here?"

"Oh yes, but you need your marriage license. If you can't get her to the courthouse in Calhoun, you can't get a license. Both of you have to be present for that."

That hardly seemed fair, but there it was. He knew that Missy wanted to be married before the baby came, but he didn't know how to make that happen. Even if they married when she was well and healed and could go to Calhoun, the baby wouldn't be born a Tucker. And he knew that bothered her something powerful.

When Miss Annie and Ruby came to visit that day, he told them he had to go to Calhoun. They agreed to stay and be with Missouri.

He took the long journey to the courthouse in Calhoun. Stepping to the counter in his best tan suit, he put on his completely respectable air. "Ma'am. I'm in need of a marriage license."
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The middle-aged woman had a frowzy, fuzzy gray-blonde pompadour and blue eyes. She looked unhappy about her hair and life in general. “How’s that? You can’t marry yourself.”

“Not trying to do that, ma’am. I want to marry a young woman who is bedridden. She’s not able to come here with me to the courthouse.”

“You’re going to have to wait until she gets up.”

“And if that possibility may not happen? How much extra will I have to pay to have you come with me to get her signature to witness it?”

It took a great deal of his money to convince the woman and her husband to come with him after she was off work. The woman couldn’t go with Arlo alone, so the three of them set off in the wagon to the teacher house. It was money well spent. Missy was right. If it was to make her happy, he could transform the sad money to happy. He liked the way that made him feel.

The woman was a little put out when she saw the reason Missy was in bed, but the husband considered it a kindly thing to do. Arlo couldn’t help but note how lucky the woman was to have anyone who wanted to be bothered with her in the first place. Some people had all the luck.

And he did, too.

After he took the white couple all the way back to Calhoun to their home, as they insisted as if he were their coachman, he went to Reverend Farmer’s house to get him. “Reverend, I got the license. Come on with me. I got some getting married to do.”

When Mrs. Farmer heard what Arlo had done, she cried and said she hadn’t heard of anything so wonderful in years. It put an extra set to the reverend’s lip, but Arlo ignored it. On the way back to the house, he picked up all the assorted Bledsoes who wanted to come. Even Lona.

She kissed his cheek as he loaded her into the wagon with everyone else. “Oh, brother, I have longed to see you on your wedding day. I’m coming. It’s been two weeks, so I should be fine. I wouldn’t miss this for anything.”

“Thank you, Sissy.”

By the time they got to the house, there was quite a festive party to prepare for the wedding.

Ruby ran outside to greet them with a stern look on her face. “The baby’s coming now. You, everyone, will have to stay outside.”

His heart sank. It had only been two weeks of wait. The baby had more growing to do.

What would happen now? Arlo had tried to do right. Didn’t it matter?

A claw gripped at his stomach and left track marks of pain behind. It was happening again. He thought of the preacher and his Bible as some kind of talisman against the same thing happening before, but it wasn't. He was a cursed man.

Dear God, if he could only have something to drink. *Put away childish things…put them away.*

There was no time for that. John patted him on the back as he took leaden footsteps into Missouri's home. It was time for his child to be born.

Chapter 10

Missy had just one request, and she voiced it: “Please, stop sitting on me.”

She knew no one was sitting on her. It just felt that way in her body.

“Is she okay?” Arlo’s worried face hovered over her.

“She’s fine. She going to be fine; all of them folks over in the church praying for her.”

“I need to pray too.” Arlo dropped to his knees, clasping his hands together.

If only she could lift her limbs and reassure him.

“That would be a better use of your time. This child ain’t got no business coming now.”

It’s my fault. I worried and cried too much while this child was trying to grow. Made it a bad place for her inside of me.

Her.

She knew the baby was a girl. She had known it all along. She just didn’t want to tell Arlo, because if she had told him, he would walk out on them. Just like the others. Now that she knew what had happened, she understood. Arlo would go and get those girl babies, Katie and Addy, and she would be their mother. They would be a family.

Wake up. Wake up from dreaming.

“Come on now,” Miss Annie said. “You got to help, honey. Push.”

God, help me.

The force, she didn’t know what else to call it, felt as if a giant bear got up off her and let the baby come into the world.

Someone screamed. Was the baby okay?

She was the one who had screamed.

“Lord, look here at this peanut.”

The fog started to lift from her mind. Missouri edged up to see Miss Annie holding a long, skinny baby about the color of a fresh peanut by the ankles. “She going to have long legs for the men folks to be looking at.”

Miss Annie chuckled as she slapped the baby to get the air into her lungs. “Look at her!” Ruby said with rapture.

“Yes. This child, she something else. She skinny, but got a good, strong way about her.”

Missouri’s daughter’s wailing was like music to her ears. The tears slid into her eyes.

“Look at her, Missy. It’s a girl.”

Arlo hovered nearby. She could see his face as moist as John

Bledsoe's had been.

She opened her mouth to speak, but it was so dry. Ruby came in and held a cup of water to her lips. Bless the child. Now she could speak. "Do you like her, Arlo?"

"Like her? Look at those fingers! She looks like she could play the violin right now. She's wonderful."

Missy said, "I want to hold her."

"An old woman can only move so fast now," Miss Annie said. "Arlo, stop that crying and get that woodstove going. It's June, but it got to be warm in here. This baby child here, she always going to do the opposite of what you say. I hope you all knows that. You in for it."

What day was it? What was her daughter's birthday?

"Day?" Missy croaked to Ruby. "Is it a new day yet?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Baxter. A new day for sure." The young girl responded back to her, smiling.

"We getting the time down," Miss Annie said. "The things they make me do now. Getting down birth certificates and such. White folks ain't never been this much in our business afore. She was born at 6:38 in the morning. Today is June 19."

Yes. Missy remembered. Her daughter had chosen the most fortuitous day, the best day to be born. Arlo had been making all of the noise in the corner to get the wood in, as Miss Annie had directed. "Miss Ann is still cleaning her off. She's a miracle. What you want to call her, Missy?"

"A good day to be born. It's Juneteenth."

"You still teaching from the bed? What's that?"

"The day the last slaves got word they were free. June 19. What the play at the schoolhouse was about. It actually happened forty-five years ago today." She slumped back on her pillow as Miss Annie handed the baby to Arlo and went back to attend to her. "Ruby, let's get Missouri cleaned up while Arlo go to fussing over that child."

"You hear that, girl?" Arlo said. "Your smart mama said you picked a good day to be born. It's a little early for you, but you're going to be fine. We'll take good care of you. And your sisters."

"Yes." She need not be ashamed. Mrs. Lewis and the college would be glad to see her and her daughter come to visit the school. Maybe June would be a teacher. June. That's what they would call her.

"Her name is June." Missy pronounced.

"Ahh. Yes, that's good. But she's my little Rose too, so we name her something more special than that. Juneteenth Rose Tucker."

Miss Annie squealed high in her voice. "Juneteenth. Arlo, you is something."

"Hey, she not just anyone's child. We'll call her Juntie."

Juntie. Leave it to Arlo to come up with something different. Something extra special. And his long, skinny daughter was an exact reflection of him.

When Arlo turned the face of the baby to Missy, she could see it was true.

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Missouri felt much better in a few hours. Sitting up and eating some broth made her feel stronger.

"When you want to marry me? When you are better, I got to get going to the hill country to get those girls."

"Pastor is still here, isn't he?"

"I'll go see."

"Ruby, come and help me with a fresh nightgown. And my hair."

"Yes, ma'am."

Missy should have felt strange with her recent student helping her with her needs, but Ruby's hands were so gentle. A Negro nurse could do very well for herself and for her people in this world. *Lord, help this girl find a life's purpose.*

Arlo came back in. "He's here. I didn't know they all out there having a morning picnic. Folks is out there having a fine time."

Missy smiled. "It's Juneteenth."

"Oh yes, a fine day."

"A great day for a wedding anniversary too."

"Hey, a day to never forget. I'll get him."

Once Ruby and Miss Annie promised Missouri she looked fine enough to sit up in the bed with her new daughter beside her, the pastor came in with his wife.

"Well, let's get this going. We going to have a wedding and a blessing."

Missouri looked up to see the entire Bledsoe clan, among others of her students and their parents, cram themselves into every nook and cranny of the house.

Arlo arranged himself in the chair next to the bed, not jolting her body on the bed. So thoughtful of him. "Get on to it, pastor. I'm ready."

"Praise God!" someone shouted from the back, and they all laughed. The baby made tiny mewling sounds, and everyone hushed instantly at the command from the small person.

"She's probably hungry. You all had your breakfast and little bit here, she ain't had none." Miss Annie frowned on the proceedings. "Got to get something more in her to get all of them inside fluids out of her."

"I'll marry you all with the short version."

Before she knew it, Missy was Mrs. Missouri Tucker.
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“That’s how her name is going down, too,” Miss Annie said. “Baby born and wedding on the same day. No need for folk to know which one happened first.”

“Thank you.” Tears of gratitude sprang to Missy’s eyes.

“My wife. Thank you.” Arlo leaned over and pulled her close to him, kissing her forehead. “I love you, you know that, right?”

“If I didn’t know it before, I know it now.”

“I’m going to wait until you’re okay and the baby is strong before we get the girls. Don’t want to heap everything on you in taking care of us.”

“I can’t wait.”

“John said Sissy is fine with you being the schoolteacher in the fall.”

“Hmmm. Guess I’m acceptable now that I’m Mrs. Tucker.”

“Could be. But more than that, I think she knows you a great teacher. You sure taught me.”

“People learn in all kinds of ways. You just have to find the way to get through to them. It’s a Milford teaching method.”

“It worked over here.”

Missouri beheld the long face of her sleeping daughter. She couldn’t get enough of looking at her. “Juneteenth is a teacher too, in her own way.”

“She will be. I see it for her.”

“I see a lot for all of us.” Missouri grasped his hand. He laced his fingers with hers and squeezed. Juntie whimpered and stirred round. And, naturally, as Missy knew how to do, she unbuttoned her nightgown, ready to nourish the future. With love.

Epilogue

God knew how to ask a whole lot of him. Missy needed a whole long time, like weeks, that she needed to recover from Juntie's birth. Course, there was the small matter that Juntie wasn't the most cooperative baby in the entire world. She insisted on being held, fed, sang to, whatever she wanted. What a girl child. But like him.

"Bless you, honey, I don't know how it's all going to work with you if you keep asking everything of everyone around you. Your mama isn't strong enough just now to be up to it, so all you got is me."

When, about a month later, he left to go get her sisters to bring them to their new home, Juntie's strong, lusty cry was the last thing he heard as he left the teacher cabin. Lord, he almost wished he had the equipment on him to take care of a baby just a month old. Her cries tore at him so.

Still, it was her cries that guided the wagon back to the teacher cabin days later. He pulled the wagon up to the house with two wide-eyed, scared souls clinging to the sides in the back. Katie and Addy in their nicest white dresses came to meet their new mama and sister. Juntie sounded like someone was murdering her. Arlo tied up the mule right away. He ran around to the back and reached his arms out to his small, light daughters. They jumped into his arms—one on each side.

His heart beat fast as he ran to the small house, his arms full of daughters. His new wife stepped outside of the teacher house, patiently holding the new baby. Juntie's mouth was open and her new gums flapped red.

"She all right?"

Missy turned and smiled at him. "Arlo, she's fine. Just wanted to know where you were, is all. Who are these lovely ladies?"

And they made the exchange, with Missy bending down to grasp the hands of the girls after he let them stand. She then handed over Juntie, gladly, as if she couldn't give him that baby fast enough. When she did, Juntie quieted almost immediately.

In a way she hadn't done before, Juntie opened her eyes and stared at him. Her brows knitted together, looking for all the world as if she could speak, she would say: Where have you been?

He drew her closer, feeling her baby grip clutch his heart more tightly than she ever had before.

"I'm here, love. Look, I've brought you sisters." He peered over Juntie's silky smooth head to see his wife encourage Katie and Addy into the house for something to eat. Missy's schoolteacher training

worked just right. She knew just what to do to make those girls feel at home.

He placed a big old kiss right on Juntie's sloped yellow forehead. "Girlie, let's you and me get one thing straight. I'm the one who's in charge here. Got that?"

Missouri edged the girls to the table. They each sat down in a chair, lost in it. "Yes, she heard that all right. If she's anything like her daddy, she'll let you believe that too."

"Or her mother." He rested the baby against his shoulder and approached Katie and Addy to introduce them to their new sister.

It was all so new, so sweet, like a candy ribbon in his mouth. The curiosity of the girls, the tired, but shining eyes of Missy, the sweet scent of the new baby…all of it filled his heart up. For the first time in his life, he felt as if he really were complete. Together they made a sort of circle going around his heart. He didn't need no drink, or the approval of some other man to make him whole because he had a family.

Right there he made up his mind. If it meant working in that mill from dawn to dusk, he would do whatever it took to keep that circle strong and whole. There was no need to wander anymore.

He was home.

Author's Note

Everyone has that one uncle who seems to get away with everything. I remember when that uncle for me—he was actually my great-uncle—died. My mother often told the story about how six or seven women came up to her at the visitation/funeral. Each one of them, in their turn, said, "Georgie told me I was the only woman he ever loved."Another time our family went somewhere to dinner and was served by a former girlfriend of this same uncle. She was so incensed at their mention of him. She uttered a profanity and everyone was afraid to eat their food!

Those stories always made me wonder about what the life of a charmer was like. What if that charmer met his match? Who would be the love of his life? What would that look like? Making the choices to change paths are never, ever easy for those who lead that kind of "charmed" life and they weren't for Arlo either. His fate is determined in the opening pages of the story of his niece, Ruby Bledsoe. Her story, *A Virtuous Ruby*, will be released by Samhain in July 2015.

Some sources that helped me with this story:

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About the Author

Piper G Huguley, named the 2015 Debut Author of the year by Romance Slam Jam and a top ten historical romance author in Publisher's Weekly by Beverly Jenkins, is a two-time Golden Heart® finalist. She is the author of "Migrations of the Heart," a five-book series of historical romances set in the early 20th century featuring African American characters. Book one in the series, *A Virtuous Ruby*, won the Golden Rose contest in Historical Romance in 2013 and was a Golden Heart® finalist in 2014. Book four, *A Champion's Heart*, was a Golden Heart® finalist in 2013. *A Virtuous Ruby* will be released by Samhain in July 2015. Book two, *A Most Precious Pearl*, will be released in September 2015.

Huguley is also the author of the "Home to Milford College" series. The series follows the building of a college from its founding in 1866. On release, the prequel novella to the "Home to Milford College" series, *The Lawyer's Luck*, reached #1 Amazon Bestseller status on the African American Christian Fiction charts.

Piper blogs about the history behind her novels at www.piperhuguley.com. She lives in Atlanta, Georgia with her husband and son.

You can reach Piper on Facebook and Twitter, as well as her blog:
Facebook: Piper Huguley
Twitter: @piperhuguley

Let It Shine

Alyssa Cole

Sofronia Wallis knows that proper Black women don't court trouble by upending the status quo, but it's 1961 and the Civil Rights movement is in full swing. Sofie's spent half her life being prim, proper, and reserved—as if that could bring her mother back—but the nonviolent protests happening across the South bring out her inner agitator.

Ivan Friedman has devoted his life to boxing, loving the finesse of a well-delivered punch and the penance of receiving one. His family escaped from Europe before the horrors of WWII, and Ivan decides to help fight injustice in their new country, even if it goes against all his instincts as a fighter.

When Ivan and Sofie meet, they realize that their pasts are intertwined and—with the sparks that fly between them—perhaps their futures will be too. With everything in their society lined up against them, will Sofie and Ivan be able to beat the odds? Or will their chance at love be destroyed by the tumultuous times they live in?

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Dedication

Dedicated to those brave men and women who stepped onto buses heading toward danger armed with only their hope for a better, more just, America.

The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.
-Alice Walker

Chapter 1

1961, Virginia

Sofie usually felt at peace after church—there was comfort in the rote liturgical acts, and in the familiarity of her fellow parishioners. She sorely needed that familiarity after almost two semesters of college at Virginia Union, where she felt more out of place than she ever had. But for some reason, Ms. Simcox's pained repetition of "Praise Jesus" hadn't made her giggle, as it had when she was a girl; instead, she nodded along at the soul-weary sound. Reverend Mills' showmanship and bluster, which often made her suppress an eye roll, resonated with something deep inside of her this time.

"Change is coming!" he'd shouted while mopping his brow. "If you believe in the power of God Almighty, you know that change is on the way!" A chill had gone through her as those words rang through the small church, echoed by the approving shouts and soft murmurs of the congregation. Sofie didn't know if Reverend Mills could actually channel the will of the Lord, but his words seemed like an answer to the doubt that had been gnawing at her all semester.

You went to school to learn, not to fight. Her father's words echoed in her head. *You know better than anyone what fighting gets you.*

Sofie glanced at her father across the basement of the church, where he sat with his brows drawn, shaking his head at something one of his friends was saying. She wished, just once, that she would look over and see him laughing like he used to.

"They finally let that child out of jail today," Mrs. Pierce said, pulling Sofie back to the after-church social gathering. "It wasn't right for them white folk to arrest her, but Patty knows better. The girl can read! Had the nerve to sit right under the 'Whites Only' sign, like she was daring them." The woman ran an age-spotted but manicured hand over her exquisitely coiffed gray hair, and passed a plate of food to one of the visiting pastors working his way down the buffet line. The young man accepted it with a gracious nod and a lingering glance at Sofie, who was just the right age to attract the attentions of promising young men in need of a good, obedient wife. Sofie scooped a spoonful of macaroni and cheese and let it fall to his Styrofoam plate with a moist plop. He fumbled to keep the plate from tipping and moved on.

"She lost the baby, you know, after they threw her off that bus," Melba Adams said in a hushed tone. Sofie almost dropped the next spoonful of food she was distributing. Her usually steady hand was shaking like old Mr. Duffy's when he needed a nip but couldn't afford it. Melba shook her head sadly. "It's sad, but I can't help but think it's

for the best. The Lord works in mysterious ways, and she was awful young to be having a baby."

The women continued gossiping, but Sofie felt the bite of food she'd snuck earlier rising up her throat. Patty's baby was dead? She couldn't call the younger girl a friend, exactly, but just last week—in this very room—Sofie had felt that baby move. She'd felt its enthusiastic kick right against her palm. Why was everyone acting like that was okay?

Sofie felt a pressure building up in her chest, a burning hot anger that surprised her. She didn't get mad. Everyone knew that, and if everyone knew it, it must be true. Just like everyone knew that a black girl who sat at the front of the bus deserved whatever she got for causing trouble. The belt that cinched Sofie's favorite blue dress suddenly seemed too tight.

She took a small, tight breath and tried to calm herself, an act that was second nature to her by now. It was why, when people described her, they used words like *nice* and *quiet* and *docile* as if they spoke of the cows on Harris Withers' farm instead of a young woman. She should've been happy—that was what she'd wanted, right? For everyone to see how good she was? But, if Sofie were honest with herself, she'd felt like none of those things lately. Every time she had to give up her seat on the bus, she considered saying no. Every time a store clerk followed her as if she had the word CRIMINAL stamped on her forehead, she wanted to whirl and demand they leave her be. And every time a group of men, white men usually, shouted crude insults from their car and made her fear the worst, then she wished she could damn them to hell herself without waiting for God's plodding judgment.

Mrs. Pierce snorted in a most unladylike way. "Awful young? How about awful fast?"

"Oh, come on now, Sister Pierce," Leonia Grant said, with a hand on her hip. "Tread lightly."

"You know these fast-tailed girls are always getting themselves into trouble," Mrs. Pierce said with an elegant shrug as if that explained everything.

Usually, Sofie would have just listened to the women gossip and ignored the urge to give her own opinion, but the new anger in her was a grease fire that wouldn't be doused. It bubbled and popped, pushing angry words out of her mouth like they were too hot to be contained in the caldron of her chest. "If she's fast, what would you call the man twice her age who put the baby in her? A speed demon?"

She almost laughed when all of the women's heads whipped in her direction. "Sofronia Wallis! Hush, now," Melba said, her eyes wide. Sofie glanced across the room, where the man in question was

showering his attentions on yet another girl young enough to be his daughter. They were only worried he would hear, she realized, not that he'd offered Patty help with her singing and gotten her with child instead. Melba looked at Sofie again. "What's gotten into you?"

"Not Jim Danielson, and thank goodness for that. Otherwise, I'd be the one you all were showing such kind Christian compassion for." Somewhere inside of her, the old Sofie was already cowering and begging forgiveness. That Sofie was worrying about what her father would say when, not if, word of her rudeness got to him. But the grease fire in her chest was still going, fueled by thoughts of Patty and the little baby who would never get to grow up. By the pictures in the papers of white folk beating people who looked just like her as the police looked on with smiles. Sofie felt like she would combust from the unfairness of it all.

Mrs. Pierce pulled her shoulders back. "How is it that you can't get out more than a squeak at choir practice, yet here you are now trying to get involved in grown folks' business?"

It seemed Mrs. Pierce, who also served as choir director, would never forgive Sofie for the fact that the young woman's promising voice had gone silent right around the time when it should have been coming into its own, as if it had been a tributary of the river that was her mother's powerful contralto and had dried up when the woman passed on.

Heat streaked up Sofie's neck and warmed her face, and she shoved the spoon into the pan of macaroni. "I don't feel well. Please excuse me." With that, she turned and walked across the basement of the church, sure that a tsunami of gossip was building behind her and would soon arrive at her shores, courtesy of a scolding from her father. She trotted up the stairs, her long pleated skirt swishing around her calves.

When she stepped outside into the warm spring afternoon, she felt she could finally breathe again. The fringe tree flowers scenting the breeze seemed to clear the troublesome thoughts from her mind.

She closed her eyes for a moment, feeling utterly alone. She hadn't ever felt like this when Mama was alive. Even though Delia Wallis had died years and years ago, and everyone told her that God didn't make mistakes, Sofie still resented her absence. *Mama would know what to do. She always knew. If only—*

Sofie cringed at the thought that assailed her then, shoved it away into that hot place inside her; maybe her anger could burn it up and make it so she never thought about that horrible day again. But even if she forgot, her father never would.

After her mother's death, Mr. Wallis had embarked on a mission: to raise a respectable black woman. Not just a good, God-fearing

woman, but the kind her mama used to roll her eyes at in the supermarket and department stores. Thus, each Christmas from the age of twelve on, Sofie received prim new dress patterns and a new etiquette book. Sofie loved making her own clothing, but the books were worse than anything her teachers could dole out. The first had been *The Practical Self-Educator*. On her eighteenth birthday, she'd unwrapped *Golden Thoughts on Chastity and Procreation* and nearly died of embarrassment. That had been the last one, two years ago, as if everything she needed to know stopped with tips on how to keep herself chaste for marriage.

It was like Daddy had forgotten how Mama always pushed Sofie to speak out, to take guff from no one. The last time Sofie had tried to make her mama proud had been the day her mother died. Sofie had felt the anger grow in her chest, the same that she felt now, and she'd done something a little black girl was never supposed to do: stand up for herself. The screaming, red-faced boys who'd been attacking Ivan, her mother's charge, had turned on her, too. When her mother ran out to stop the melee, she'd collapsed in the middle of them; her mama's last moment had been loud, frightening, and humiliating.

The doctors said it was an aneurysm, but Sofie had thought of something her Sunday school teacher often said: "God don't like ugly." So she accepted her etiquette books gladly, and read them until the pages were worn thin. She sewed her dresses with skirts well below the knee and made sure to wear her gloves and hat. Her hair was always pressed straight, or pin-curled just so. She nodded along when the women at her church told her the rules she would have to follow forever. But now the anger was back for some reason, and she knew that the solution to her particular problem wasn't covered in any of her rule books.

"Lord, please tell me what to do," she whispered, crossing her arms over the starched fabric of her dress. The buttons pressed into her arms as she waited, but as in every other instance, she got no reply. She opened her eyes and shook her head, and was about to laugh at herself when a sign pinned to the center of the community message board caught her eye.

MEETING:
TONIGHT, MAY 12, AT 7:30
COMMUNITY CENTER, ROOM 203
STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE
TAKE A STAND AGAINST INJUSTICE

Sofie knew what those kinds of meetings entailed. Her friend Henrietta was involved, and her friend David, Henrietta's boyfriend, was a coordinator. Sofie always wanted to say "yes" when Henrietta invited her to come out, but things were different for her. Henrietta's

parents were involved in the movement. Sofie's father railed about protestors causing trouble for good black folk who kept their heads down and worked hard. She would gently remind him that there was plenty of trouble before folk started protesting, but he was stubborn as a mule.

Sofie glanced at the sign again. Protesting was something that wasn't covered in any of her etiquette books, and if it were it would definitely fall under the "detrimental to the race" category, but just thinking of going to the meeting filled her with a sense of excitement and purpose that she hadn't felt since…ever.

What Daddy doesn't know won't hurt him, she thought as she returned to the church gathering to make amends for her outburst. That was what a good girl would do, after all.

Chapter 2

"Sof!" Henrietta whispered fiercely, throwing out an elbow that caught Sofie in the ribs. "What are you looking at, girl? If you want to volunteer, you have to *listen*." She looked suspiciously at the crowd, as if trying to spot who'd caught her friend's eye.

Sofie winced, rubbing at her side. Her friend was soft and curvy in all the right places, with the exclusion of her razor-sharp elbows.

"I'm listening," she whispered back. And she had been. The little notebook she always carried with her for making lists was open in her lap, and notes covered the page. But she'd also been unable to tear her eyes away from the man across the room, the tall one with dark hair and dolorous eyes who leaned against the wall, listening intently to whoever had the floor at a given moment. There was a quiet intensity to his attention, as if he was turning over what each speaker said and carefully fitting it into some bigger picture.

She didn't know why her gaze sought him out—she told herself it was only because he was one of the few white men in the room, and thus he stood out as an anomaly. But she knew that wasn't true. A simple anomaly wouldn't make her breath catch and her palms sweat in her gloves. There was something about him, but she couldn't pinpoint it.

Most of the young people in the room were dressed in suits that screamed respectability, but he wore dark denim pants and a simple white t-shirt. Sofie had a feeling that was his idea of dressing up. He brought a hand up to rub at his eye, and Sofie saw they were large, with bruises fading away at the knuckles. There was a bump on the bridge of his nose that hinted it'd been broken, and probably more than once. Paired with the dark half-moon under his right eye, she could draw one conclusion: he was a fighter. Even that intense gaze of his showed that he brooked no resistance. What was a man like him doing at a meeting for nonviolent protestors?

His head turned slowly, but with such precise motion that it seemed sudden, and his gaze connected with hers. Heat rose to Sofie's cheeks, but she held their stare-down for a moment longer. The etiquette books said staring was impolite, but she'd been impolite all day and was rather liking it. The stranger's lips pulled up at the corners, but not in a friendly way. His smile made her think of sucking honey straight from the comb, of the sweetness spreading on your tongue and how it could make you smile like that; like you'd just tasted something real good and wanted more.

A low, sultry sound rose up in her throat, the kind a woman made to let you know she was about to belt out a tune that would make you

blush. It was an uncharacteristic sound for Sofie, who was the bane of every choirmaster due to her stubborn refusal to project her voice. Luckily, it blended with the sounds of the students who were giving David their full attention, supporting him with cries of “Yes, brother!” and “Preach!”

Sofie turned back to pay attention to David, who was working the crowd with that gentle but powerful voice of his. David, with his reddish-brown skin, nearly the color of the brick building where they’d shared their first—and last—kiss. They’d been children then, though, only fourteen. She’d gotten over her childhood crush, and David had recently found happiness with Henrietta. She was elated for her friends, if not a little bit envious. She ignored the loneliness that enveloped her like the darkness of her bedroom when she woke in the night, the kind she wasn’t sure came from a lack of light or from something dark and undeserving of God’s grace inside her.

“Now, ya’ll believe you know what you’re getting into, but I ask that you think long and hard.” David’s father was a preacher, and he’d inherited the man’s booming voice and magnetic personality. “Have you seen the pictures in the paper of what’s happening at the sit-ins across the South? Someone might call you a nigger, or pour ketchup on you, and maybe you can handle that.” He looked around encouragingly before quickly drawing his brows into an accusatory expression. “But if you want to participate, you need to be sure that you can deal with a white man calling your mother a whore as he punches you in the head. With a mob pulling you to the ground and stomping you into unconsciousness. With someone punching your girl or grabbing her breast and calling her a jezebel. Can you deal with that and not fight back?” He cast a long look over the crowd. Some of the men grumbled and shook their heads. Sofie risked a glance at the fighter and caught his gaze sliding away from her; he was watching her, too. She plucked at the pleats in her skirt and shifted in her seat.

Her thoughts were a muddle. When she’d decided to go to the meeting, she hadn’t understood exactly what she was getting into; this was a dangerous thing the students were planning to do. To sit where they weren’t allowed or wanted, to be still no matter what was unleashed upon them. Henrietta had mentioned that the group needed help with administrative tasks and fundraising, and even though just attending had been an act of defiance, Sofie thought maybe she could help with that. Daddy couldn’t get mad about shuffling papers, could he? But as she listened to speaker after speaker recount the latest acts of resistance, the confusion that’d been twisting her inside out transformed into excitement. Could she ever be brave enough to do such a thing? Maybe she could.

“That’s all for tonight,” David said from the front of the room.

“For those interested in the sit-in and other activities, please come to the training session two days from now. You can get the details from Henny. I can’t say it’ll be fun, but you’ll learn right quick whether you’re cut out for this or not.” He rubbed his jaw, perhaps thinking of a training session that had ended in a scuffle. Sofie glanced at her fighter—*not mine*, she corrected—but he simply looked amused.

Henrietta was pulled into the crowd, her formidable organizational skills obvious in the way she deftly handled the dozens of questions being hurled at her without mussing her curls. Sofie thought she might faint to have that much attention on her all at once, to be the one people turned to for guidance. But still…David’s words tumbled around in her mind, ricocheting around like the pinball game she sometimes played at the Student Union.

She sat in her seat and looked at her gloved hands as she waited for the meeting to die down. When a set of bruised knuckles came into her peripheral vision, she willed herself not to look up. For one thrilling moment, she thought he would stop beside her. Hoped he would stop, really. Maybe she *was* going crazy. He kept walking, saving her the trouble of finding out how she would’ve reacted.

“You okay, Sof?” When she looked up David was there, concern evident in the crease of his brow. Most of the other people had milled out while she’d been deep in thought.

“That was a lot of information to absorb. I just need some air, I think,” she said, standing to join them as they climbed the stairs.

“I was surprised to see you here, to be honest,” he said. “But I’m glad you came. We can use all the administrative help we can get.” It annoyed her that he assumed she wouldn’t do any more than filing papers. But then she remembered the last eight years of her life—David was only acting on the information she’d provided to him. When they reached his car, the metallic monster that ferried people to and from the meeting, there was already a crowd surrounding it. Sofie couldn’t stand the thought of being pressed against anyone while she felt so ready to jump out of her skin.

“You all go ahead. I’ll just walk. I only live a few minutes from here, you know.”

“Walk?” Henrietta asked. “Haven’t you heard what happened to that woman on Ryan Road last week? A car full of white boys pulled over and snatched her, attacked her right in the woods over there. The cops don’t care either, even though she knows the ones who did it.”

Sofie reflexively clutched her hand to her heart. Not out of shock—this type of thing happened too often for her to be shocked—but out of pity. Still, she was feeling rebellious. Let someone try to snatch her. With all this anger pent up inside her, she’d kill them.

“There’s no room for me,” she said.

"You can ride with me, if you want."

It didn't take every set of eyes widening in disbelief for Sofie to know who the rough voice belonged to. She turned and found herself face to face with the man she'd been studying all evening long. She knew it was wrong, but she felt another type of warmth now, one that had nothing to do with anger and settled somewhere in the vicinity of an area proper women never discussed.

She felt an arm go around her. "Sofie doesn't take rides from strangers." Henrietta's tone was crisp enough that she didn't have to add the words *especially white ones* for everyone to get her point.

"Strangers?" The man never took his eyes off her. He grinned, revealing a chipped tooth, and a memory flashed through Sofie's mind. A skinny young boy flying over the handlebars of his bike, her mother running over and cradling him in her arms.

No. It couldn't be.

She allowed herself to feel a little bit of relief, right next to the anxiety and nostalgia this suddenly familiar man drew from her. Now she understood why her gaze had been drawn to him. Well, in part.

"You really don't remember me, Sofronia?" He laughed, a sound that was familiar and not at the same time, just like the rest of him. He was too tall now, and too muscular, and too handsome to be who she thought he was. He flashed that chipped tooth again, and she looked past the bruised face and stubbled cheeks and knew where she had seen those eyes that bored right into her. "I guess I have changed a bit," he said. "You look the same." The way he said "the same" should have been an insult considering that she'd been twelve when he last saw her, but there was a lift of the brow that showed appreciation.

"Black girls can't be princesses, Ivan." They'd been playing in the woods behind his parents' house, despite her mother's warning. He had looked over at her, teeth too big and eyes too wide. "Well, Jews can't be Nazi hunters, but I'm the best there is!" He'd run ahead a few steps, spraying down a line of imaginary SS men with his imaginary gun, then looked back at her. "Besides, every beautiful girl can be a princess. I read it in a book."

Sofie pulled herself back to the present. Murmurs passed through the students getting ready to leave, and some hung out of their car windows to get a better view. Oh God, they were creating a scene. A good young lady never allowed herself to be the center of attention, but Sofie couldn't help the way she gawped at the man.

She felt like a frayed rope threateningly close to unraveling as the realization hit her. She thought maybe she *should* just fall apart; then people could finally see all the hurt that hid away beneath her precisely sewn dresses, perfectly curled hair, and hats that tilted just

so.

"You know this guy?" David asked, obviously wary.

Sofie nodded. Her head felt strangely heavy on her neck, like it might tumble off if she kept bobbing like a fool instead of speaking.

"Ivan?" Her voice shook, drawing the name out to four syllables instead of two.

He smiled again, but it was a soft one this time, tinged with pity. In that moment, she remembered that she hadn't been the only one to mourn Delia Wallis's loss.

Sofie thought she would faint. Instead she pasted on the smile that had gotten her through adolescence and into adulthood. "My mother worked for his family, the Friedmans, and we used to play together when we were younger," she explained to everyone in a tone that she hoped indicated finality.

He's the reason she's dead. But Sofie knew that wasn't fair. *It's because of him that I killed her.*

"Aren't you the guy who knocked out Knuckles Nelson two weeks ago?" One of the male volunteers pushed through the crowd and stared at Ivan with open admiration. "Man, the way you let him think he had you hemmed up, then walloped him!" The kid reenacted the moves as he talked.

Ivan ran a hand over the back of his neck with embarrassed pride. "Yeah, that was me."

Well, that explained his bruising.

"Oh, I've seen you fight before. Didn't recognize you outside the ring," David said. "This guy might could give Sugar Ray a run for his money if he had the chance."

"Trust me, I'm working on it," he said with a smile. Then he looked at Sofie. "You still need a ride?" He asked like it was something normal, but just the thought of being alone with him made her feel like her dress was two sizes too small. Having that intense gaze settle on her with an audience was making her feel burst open and exposed; if they were alone…

Ivan leaned forward a bit, raising one brow in a way she remembered so well now. "I have my dad's car, and it would be nice to catch up. Anyone else who needs a ride is welcome, too, of course."

"Actually, I'll just squeeze in with the others. Thanks anyway, though." She rushed around David's car, putting the hunk of metal between her and the man who was dredging up both unwanted memories and new sensations that were truly unfamiliar to her.

A couple of younger boys migrated over to Ivan, opening up more room in David's car. Ivan nodded, then gave her a little salute. "See you around."

That should have been a threat, but a not so small part of Sofie

hoped he was right.

Chapter 3

Ivan never slept well, but the night after that first meeting was a fever dream of tossing and turning that'd seemed never-ending. He needed to be in top shape for his upcoming match; he should have been watching reels and making notes of Calvin Jones's techniques, but he'd accomplished none of that.

The few scraps of sleep he'd been able to snatch had thrown him for a loop: dreams of Sofronia, or Sofie as she was called now, had left him tossing and turning. She ran from him through one fantastic landscape after another, as if afraid he'd hurt her, but when he caught her she didn't seem to want to be anywhere else. He hadn't dreamed like that—soft curves and wide brown eyes as he plunged into warmth—since he was a teenager waking up in the night to sticky sheets. It had been her haunting his dreams then, too.

He didn't know why the urge to go to her after the meeting had been so strong or why, when all those skeptical faces had turned to him in the parking lot, he'd wanted it known that his acquaintance with her preceded all of theirs. He hadn't spoken to Sofie for eight years now, double the amount of time they'd spent together as children, but a stupid little thing like time hadn't changed the way he felt about her. His mother had called it a childhood crush, and clucked a laugh every time he mentioned Sofie's name with adulation. His father had told him to stay away from *those people* and chided his mom for not being more careful. Ivan had never stopped thinking of her.

Every time he taped his hands up before a fight, he thought of how weak he'd been the last day they'd played together. Every time he twisted and jabbed, and especially when he took a hit, he thought of how she'd stepped in front of the mob of neighborhood boys who'd grabbed up his arms and his legs, shouting, "We'll put you in the oven, where your kind belongs!" She'd used her fists to protect him, and then Miss Delia had come running from the house. He'd thought she'd make everything right, but the woman who had always been so strong froze and tumbled to the ground instead, sending the neighborhood boys scattering to the winds, their chests heaving with laughs of disbelief. "Did you see that nigger fall like a tree?" had echoed in his ears as he'd watched Sofronia try to shake her mother awake. The tears streaming down both of their faces had formed a single pool of moisture between them as they'd hugged each other tightly, unable to comprehend their loss.

Ivan had taken a lot of hits to the head, but he had a feeling the memory of Sofie screaming, "It's my fault" as she was pulled away

from him would never get jarred loose. Nor would the thing he'd been too stunned to respond. *No, it's mine*. He was old enough to know now that it had been an unluckily timed medical ailment, but he'd always wondered if Sofie had allowed herself forgiveness. Seeing how tight and withdrawn she was now, compared to the rambunctious girl he'd known—he didn't think it was only adulthood that had made Sofie a dormouse.

Ivan took a quick shower and padded through the living room past his father, who was curled up on the old couch that had become his second bed over the last two years. Ivan knew that if he bothered to look down, he would see the photo album beside him.

Each night that Ivan found his father in this misery, he wanted to break the world. Leo Friedman wasn't an expressive man, but he'd loved his wife and missed her like hell, so much so that he could neither sleep in their marriage bed or dispose of it. Ivan had been by his father's side through the ritual stages of mourning—*aninut*, *shiva*, *shloshim*—but that hadn't released his dad from the grief that was always with him. He put on a good face at the synagogue and community events, but Ivan saw the toll the loss had taken on him. He was like a man whose shadow had been ripped away from him; every time he stepped out of the darkness and into the light, he need only look down to remember what he'd lost.

Ivan draped a crocheted blanket over him, then slid off the yarmulke that was being crushed against the arm of the sofa to reveal his father's thinning pate. His mother hadn't had any hair by the end of the cancer treatments, and her head had been smooth under his palm that last day. Ivan wanted to touch the vulnerable spot of scalp showing through, to give comfort where he could, but that would wake his father. These days they got along much better when one of them was sleeping.

He threw his gym bag over his shoulder as he stepped out into the still-dark morning and hopped onto his bike—not the Ducati Bronco he dreamed of owning, but a simple Schwinn. His dad needed the '54 Skylark they shared to get to his small watch repair shop in Richmond. Ivan breathed in deeply as he propelled himself through the cool early morning air toward his boxing gym; the black gym on the edge of town, not the country club where the white boxers trained.

Jack's Gym had produced several champions, and even some guys who were working the circuit now. Ivan told himself he would've chosen Jack's anyway, even if he hadn't been banned from the country club. He hoped he would've, at least. It had been his home away from home since Miss Delia died, and he begged his mother not to force another nanny on him. He'd only been months away from

becoming bar mitzvah, and had convinced his mother that he needed to put away childish things. He thought she'd caved so easily only because she missed Miss Delia too. "Delia, *zikhronah livrakha*. It's not as if I'll find anyone else who can make shlishkes as well as I can," she'd said with a shrug. It might have seemed cold to an onlooker, but coming from his mother that had been the highest compliment.

He pulled a key out from under a rubber tire near the door and let himself into the musty gym. The scents of sweat and sawdust made him feel more at home than the antiseptic smell of his house; his father had become troublingly obsessed with cleanliness after his mother's passing, spending hours at a time scrubbing the floors and counters.

Big Jack was there before him, as usual. The man was going on sixty-five and still strong and spry. Jack was working the heavy bag hard, which meant there was something on his mind.

"Did Loretta give you cold grits for breakfast again?" Ivan asked, hoping to pull a smile from the man.

"Loretta's cold grits are still better than anything you'll ever eat in your sorry life," Jack said. He kept punching. "Look at that paper over there."

Jack flicked his head in the direction of a table where a newspaper lay folded and a cup of coffee stood cold. Ivan picked up the crinkled mess, already knowing what type of image would greet him. A group of whites, hundreds of them at least, surrounding a Greyhound bus. A smaller image below showed a beaten man with blood streaming down his face being given water by what appeared to be a bystander. Ivan shuddered. The hatred in the eyes of the men surrounding the bus was chilling. Was this what had driven his parents from Budapest years before he was born? This undiluted disgust that could drive you to harm your fellow man simply for existing?

"These kids out there, your age or younger even, riding them buses and trying to make a change." Jack punched the bag hard, a blow that would have knocked a grown man out cold. "All that hope and idealism and those people said, 'We're gonna beat that hope right out of you.'"

Ivan taped his hands as his mentor punched and punched, letting the man work out his frustration. He flexed his hands, testing the give at his knuckles, and then walked over and held the bag still, absorbing the impact of Jack's last couple of punches. Jack breathed heavily, sweat coursing through the few wrinkles that showed his age, then rested his head against the bag.

"You know I'm not from these parts originally," he said. "My family is from Texas. Every year we had this Juneteenth celebration,

and my grandpa would tell the story from when he was a boy. He saw the Union soldiers ride up with his own eyes and heard with his own ears when they let his people know they were free, that they had been for months, even though the slave masters had denied them that truth. That's kinda what this feels like. Like we still toiling, waiting for the *real* freedom to set in."

Jack looked up at him, despair in his eyes, and it dawned on Ivan that his friend was old. An old man in a state where slavery wasn't that distant a memory. Jack would tell anyone he'd lived a good life, doing what he loved, but Ivan knew there were stories that only came out after a drink or two. Stories about men with white hoods. Brightly burning crosses. Cars driving slowly through black neighborhoods while husbands and sons stood tensed on the porch with guns locked and loaded.

Jack sighed. "My grandkids are just getting old enough to understand the world. I hoped…I hoped life would be different for them."

Ivan hated seeing the way Jack's shoulders hunched in defeat. The man was a heavyweight champion, but he was buckling under the weight of the world.

"I went to a nonviolent resistance meeting last night," Ivan said. He didn't want a pat on the back, only to let Jack know where he stood.

Jack stared at Ivan for a long time and then laughed, a hacking laugh that might have sounded like respiratory distress to anyone who didn't know him. "Boy, you love throwing a punch more than any other boxer in here. What you doing with them Gandhi wannabes?"

"I do love it. I'm good at it, too," Ivan said as he took control of the heavy bag, warming up with quick, light blows. "But you know what I'm even better at? Taking a punch." He stopped his warm up and let the bag swing back and hit him. "If someone needs to take a beating for the cause, you can't do better than this ugly mug."

He thought of Sofie stepping in front of the group of boys all those years ago. There had been no fear in her despite being outnumbered and knowing society was on the boys' side no matter what—even children knew that fact. She'd been damned brave, and she'd done it for him.

Jack raised his brows, the question rippling in furrows that went right up his bald head. "Any not-ugly mug in particular you hoping to keep safe?"

Ivan sometimes forgot how well the man knew him.

"No way, Jack. I'm doing this because it's what's right. You don't join the Civil Rights movement for a woman. Come on." Ivan flung the bag Jack's way. Jack dodged it like a pro and continued scrutinizing

him.

“No, but ain’t nothing wrong with a bonus, like the prize in your Cracker Jacks. Besides, you ain’t foolin’ anyone with that dopey smile.”

Ivan chuckled and allowed himself a moment of just being a guy who was really digging a girl. There was no way anything would come of it, but getting to see Sofie wasn’t a chance he’d turn down.

“All right, enough of that, Romeo,” Jack said. “You have a prizefight a week from now. This nonviolence stuff is well and good, but in here? There’s only one thing I need from you, and ain’t nothing peaceful about it.”

Chapter 4

After studying for her upcoming final exams, Sofie had prepared her father's favorite dinner: meatloaf with mashed potatoes. A pitcher of sweet tea sat sweating on the table, and she absently drew a finger through the moisture accumulating on the wood surface as she created a list of her next moves in her head.

1.) Wait for Daddy to settle down at the table and talk about his day.

2.) Tell him how well studying for finals is going and mention you'll probably make the Dean's List again.

3.) Casually mention you'll be volunteering with an association a few nights this week.

4.) Dodge all questions about what, exactly, the association does.

5.) Pray he doesn't find out the truth, then pray for forgiveness for lying to begin with.

She left off number six, "Try not to stare at Ivan too much when you see him tomorrow," because it was probably not doable, and she hated listing actions that couldn't be checked off as completed. She'd been unable to stop thinking of him since the night before, even though she knew better. Having impure thoughts about a white man was bad enough, but one who wasn't even Christian was a definite no-no. She'd had a crush on him as a little girl, but that was different. He'd been the only boy who laughed at her jokes and refused to make fun of her frizzy hair. They'd spent hours creating fantastical worlds together where they were both brave and strong, where people couldn't hurt them just because of what they looked like, in Sofie's case, or what God they worshiped, in Ivan's. Their imaginary adventures had been brought to an abrupt halt, but Sofie's soft spot for him had apparently remained.

The shuffle of shoes against hard wood warned Sofie of her father's arrival; she stopped slouching in her seat and stood with her back straight and a bright smile on her face.

"Ready for dinner, Daddy?" she called out. She got no reply.

Mr. Wallis walked into the room with his hands linked behind his back and his head bowed. She remembered a time when he used to come into the kitchen with a smile, reaching for her mama with love in his eyes. Those days were long gone. Sofie stiffened in her seat, feeling the anxiety and anger emanating from her father fill the room like fumes that threatened to choke the bravery out of her. He was in a mood, and because he was in a mood her plan to ask permission would have to wait.

She took their plates from the stove, where she'd left them to warm. "I made your favorite. I think I've got Mama's recipe down pat

now."

He looked up at her, and a familiar disappointment was etched deeply in his face, like ruts on a well-used road. "You planning on telling me what you were doing at that agitator meeting last night, or you just gonna sit here and talk to me like I'm stupid? Like you did last night when you lied and said you were meeting Henrietta?" His voice was so cold that she wanted to wrap her arms around herself in the warmth of a Southern spring night.

"Daddy, I can explain—"

"Sister Pierce told me she saw you in front of the community center, and that you were fraternizing with a white boy to boot. She said he looked quite familiar with you." He shook his head. "You're the first Wallis to go to college, and I was so proud of that. Now I have to wonder what it is you're really doing when you say you're in class or studying with friends."

Sofie hadn't eaten yet, and she was glad of it because her stomach gave a vicious twist. Nausea rolled through her at the anger in his words. She'd been caught in a lie, but he was also implying something about her that no father should imply about his daughter. His ideas about how an unmarried woman should and shouldn't interact with a man were old-fashioned, to put it kindly, but for him to treat her like a brazen hussy without giving her the benefit of the doubt…

All of her etiquette lessons and decorum fled her as disbelief hightailed it out of there to make room for anger. Sofie suddenly found she was standing, looking down at her father as he glared at her, waiting for his answer.

"All of these years I've been nothing but a good daught—" She choked on the word and swiped at a hot tear that slipped down her cheek. "A good daughter. I've done everything you asked of me, been your perfect little princess. And all it takes is one report from Mrs. Pierce and you're ready to call me a jezebel? Just like that?"

Her father picked up his fork and stabbed it into his meatloaf. "You didn't answer my question."

Sofie had thought she'd known loneliness before, but she'd been wrong. Loneliness was the one man who was supposed to protect and love you no matter what looking at you as if you were a mistake that needed fixing. Sofie had spent ten years suppressing so much of herself, just to please him; she'd thought one day she'd get it right, but the truth came to her like an icy deluge, shocking the warmth out of her. She could never be the daughter he wanted, not unless she found some way to make it so that Mama never died. Her hands were trembling fists at her side as she shook her head. "I was with Henrietta, *and* I was at the meeting."

"You admit you lied to me, then?"

“I didn’t lie. I just didn’t tell you the whole truth. And that’s because I knew that you’d overreact like this instead of asking me why I wanted to volunteer or what I hoped to achieve.” The anger was building in her; her voice shook from trying to contain her betrayal. “I was planning to ask your permission to participate, but I was a fool to think you’d care about what I want or need. All you’ve been after since Mama died was a perfect little girl who looked and talked and walked exactly as you liked. You should have just gotten yourself a porcelain doll because that’s what you need more than a daughter.”

“How dare you backtalk me?” His fist slammed on the table, making the silverware jump. “I’ve given you everything a girl could want, and all I’ve asked for in return was respect.”

“What do I want, Daddy? Tell me. Because all you’ve given me is a list of ways in which I shouldn’t embarrass you, and that’s a poor excuse for a gift.” She stared at him, fists balled at her sides.

Her father didn’t answer, he simply pushed his plate away and left the room, as if she weren’t significant enough to argue with. Sofie stood staring after him for a moment, but the creaking of the floorboards above her meant he was in his room, gone to bed for the night.

Her body moved on autopilot—she wrapped up their uneaten food, washed the dishes, cleaned up the crumbs. The same things she did every night. Only she had never argued with her father like this before—not out loud, at least. When he would explain the things she did wrong and how she should fix them, she’d always nodded and apologized. That was her burden to bear for dragging Mama into that fatal melee; submission was her penance, and she’d always paid it gladly. Tonight had been different in so many ways, though. She didn’t want to apologize; in fact, she was surer than ever that joining the nonviolent movement was the right choice. She hated the lingering discord, but she hated more that her father could so easily find a reason to doubt her.

Sofie thought of the way Ivan had said, “You look the same.” He was talking about the little girl that her father had called unkempt and unruly, but he said it like it was something good. She had the oddest urge to talk to him, to ask if his parents made him feel like he was only worthwhile if he did exactly as they said. But that was foolish. Ivan wasn’t a friend she could call for support; he was nothing but a memory. And if she were smart, things would stay that way.

She was courting enough trouble as it were, Sofie thought as she carried her weary body to bed. Thinking of calling Ivan Friedman, or doing anything else with him, simply wasn’t an option.

Chapter 5

Ivan had severely miscalculated how suddenly having Sofie in his life would affect him. He'd thought that being a grown man would've cured him of the ridiculous tightness in his stomach that used to strike whenever he thought of her. He'd thought he could keep his fantasies of how her curves would feel under his palms confined to his dreams.

But even now, as he sat squeezed into a too-small desk at the front of the room while fellow committee members berated him on everything from his looks to his heritage, all of his focus was on her. She was at the back of the room filing papers, making lists and putting things in order. That wasn't surprising—he remembered how she was always so careful to keep the kosher utensils from the non-kosher when she helped Miss Delia with the dishes like it was a challenge instead of a chore. Her gaze often wandered to the fracas at the front of the room. She'd caught him watching her more than once, looking away immediately every time. But he saw the way her hands clutched a pile of papers extra tightly, how she awkwardly knocked a box of pencils off the edge of the desk. He almost groaned when she went to her hands and knees, her dress tightening around her bosom and her full skirt revealing the delicate skin at the back of her knees. He wanted to run his tongue over that spot, but apparently Sofie was a good girl now, and good girls didn't do those kinds of things.

"This guy seems pretty immovable," David said to the man helping him run the training, speaking as if Ivan weren't sitting right there. "But can we risk someone who beats people up for the joy of it?"

Two skeptical faces looked down at him.

"Hey, cool it with that kind of talk. Boxing is a beautiful sport; it's more than beating people up. That's not to say it doesn't require a certain affinity for violence," Ivan said. He cracked his knuckles and then flashed a smile at David. He wanted to look at Sofie but wasn't quite ready to see the disapproving expression that likely marred her face. "But the ability to dole out pain is also the ability to accept it. How many of you have ever taken a hit? Do you know how to block—not attack—how to contort your body to lessen the pain of a blow? How to take the violence that's being done to you and accept it as an inevitability? I can show you those things if you want."

Ivan didn't know what David was thinking. He might not like the idea of a random guy, and a white one at that, strolling in and presuming to exert any kind of authority. It would be the same as the Christians who sometimes showed up at his father's temple to tell the congregation about the New Testament and how gee-golly great it

was, as if his people just hadn't thought to read past Deuteronomy.

David's eyes were narrowed in contemplation. "That could be useful to us. We'll see how the rest of the training goes. Sofie, come here. Switch with Lemuel. Lem, you're good for the sit-in. Remember to practice the meditation, deep breathing, and to reread from the selected texts beforehand."

Ivan tensed in his seat. He didn't know what David was up to or why he was calling Sofie to take part in this ugliness, but he didn't like it.

Breathe in, breathe out. He drew on his years of training and didn't let the way Sofie's hips swayed as she approached the desk, or the sweet vanilla scent of her as she passed in front of him, distract him.

Their gazes clashed again as she sat down, and Ivan felt a disconcerting sensation, similar to when an opponent had him against the ropes with no defenses. Everything about her was perfect—too perfect. Her pastel green dress, handmade so that it hugged every curve just right but didn't offer up everything on a platter. There was a series of tiny buttons down the sides of her dress; he doubted she knew what an enticement something so prim could be.

She was stiff in the seat beside him, and now that she was next to him she wouldn't look his way. Her back was straight, shoulders pushed back, and every strand of her hair was pomaded down and pulled into a tight bun. He wanted to reach over, undo those damned buttons, and maybe see what was keeping those stockings up beneath her skirt if not magic. He wanted all of that, but more, he wanted her to ask him to do it.

Sofie glanced at him warily, and Ivan hoped his face didn't project the lecherous path his thoughts were taking. There was a flushed look about her, same as the other night. She hadn't known who he was, but she had stared at him all night just the same. She wasn't the first woman who'd looked at him that way, but she was the only one who made it seem like she was breaking some rule by doing so. Ivan wasn't one for following the rules, and if she needed some guidance in that department, he'd be happy to help.

Henrietta rushed over. "This might be too much for her, David. I can do it if you want."

"Honey, you know Sofie isn't the kind of person to fight back. She'll be fine." David's words were hugely insulting, but for some reason he seemed to think he was being complimentary.

"You sure you talking about the same person, David? The Sofronia I knew had the quickest temper this side of the Mississippi," Ivan said. He was just joking, but she glared at him.

"The Sofronia you knew doesn't exist any more," she said. Her voice was sweet, but only to cover the tartness of her words, like the

candies he used to get by the bag from the five and dime. “And it’s Sofie now. Sofie is nice, kind, quiet, and the last person to go around stirring up trouble.”

Funnily enough, the bitterness underlying Sofie’s words sounded a lot like Sofronia to him.

“I’ve been taking a physics class at college,” Ivan said, leaning closer to her because his body didn’t seem to want to do anything else. “My professor says that nothing can just stop existing. Energy can only change form. Maybe old Sofronia isn’t down for the count just yet.”

She crossed her arms and looked up at David. “Can we get on with this? My father is expecting me home soon.” Ivan wondered why the mention of her father made her frown deepen. But training was back in session, and as much as he wished it were otherwise, he wasn’t someone she would confide in.

David pressed up close behind them so that his thighs were touching both of them. “What do we got here? A nigger lover, boys.”

The words scalded through Ivan. He knew this was fake. He knew there was no way that David was being malicious, but his jaw still clenched hard.

“Seems like this fool don’t know that black pussy is only for getting your dick wet, not gallivanting around the streets with. You from up north? Yeah, that’s it. Maybe you’re a Yankee kike who thinks he’s gonna change things down here.”

Anger was coursing through him, but he didn’t turn and pop David in the face like his instincts spurred him to. There was a lot of waiting in boxing if you were fighting someone good, and he’d wait out this barrage like he always did, except David wouldn’t be sprawled on the floor afterward.

He glanced at Sofie, expecting to see her teary-eyed or hunched over, but when her dark eyes turned up to his they were rich with suppressed emotions. She didn’t tremble, or acknowledge how everyone was hovering, waiting to pull her out of the scene in case it got too much for her. “Did you know that a teenage girl lost her baby last week?” she said calmly to Ivan, ignoring their fellow volunteers, who had now begun shoving them. Ivan shook his head. “She lived in my neighborhood and went to my church. The last time I saw her she was telling me how the sickness hit her at any time, not just morning, and could get so bad she couldn’t stand. One day last week, she took a seat at the front of the bus.”

Ivan didn’t want to hear the rest of this, but Sofie seemed to be steeling herself with the story.

“I went and visited her today. She wasn’t trying to be an activist —she just didn’t want to vomit and she couldn’t hardly move once she sat down. A police officer shoved her off the bus, beat her, and then

said she was resisting. They didn't take her to the hospital when she said she couldn't feel her baby kicking anymore."

There was a silence as Sofie's hard gaze left Ivan's face and she looked at the other volunteers. "Now all I can think about is how a black baby can be killed just to ensure that a white person gets a seat. And it makes me angry. It makes me wish I had the power to set this world ablaze, but, lucky for some people, I don't. So nothing anyone screams at me is worse than the knowledge that Patty's baby was alive and now it's dead. A beating won't make me forget that every day of my life I have to defer to someone else just because I have more melanin. I can go to a sit-in and take whatever these people dish out, but don't make the mistake of thinking I'll do it because I'm nice."

There was something about the way the word *nice* scraped out of her throat that made the hairs on Ivan's neck stand on end. She had obviously shocked the people around her, the people who were supposed to know her best, but the only thing that surprised him was that she'd waited this long to let it all hang out.

"Wait, are you saying you want to do the sit-in, Sofie?" Henrietta clasped her hands together as if she was speaking to a child. "What will your father say?"

"And what if you get hurt?" David asked.

"What if I do?" Sofie asked. "It's the chance we all take. You just sent me up here because you thought it would be funny. Because I'm so *sweet*." She laughed bitterly then, and if anyone had been under that impression, they were surely changing their minds now. "The bottom line is I'm one of the best-qualified people to do this sit-in. I'm young, photogenic, and I've been quietly suffering fools for most of my life. I can do this."

"Girl, I just knew there was more to you than that Miss Prim and Proper," Henrietta said with a relieved sigh. "Sometimes you just got that little extra edge in your voice, and I knew it couldn't be gas all the time."

When Sofie's eyes flashed back to Ivan, they were sparkling with challenge.

The door to the common room flew in and a young man, lanky and high yellow, called out, "Come see the news. Come! It's horrible."

The scenes on the small black-and-white television looked like something out of a war film. The camera panned over a mob of white men surrounding an interstate bus, ravening as they broke out windows with pipes and rocks and attacked the people inside. On the outskirts of the crowd, women dressed in skirts and dresses cheered them on, their faces contorted into masks of hatred. Some of them cradled infants in their arms. A shell-shocked news reporter tried to explain what was happening behind him. "They say that they're going

to burn them alive in the bus. Folks at home, remember that these are six members of a nonviolent protest group and there are innocent passengers who have nothing to do with the protest." A man ran by and shoved the reporter, and then there was a loud whoosh, like the sound of a lit matchmaking contact with the gas from a stovetop burner. There were even more screams as flames shot out of the back of the bus.

All of the air seemed to disappear from the room around them as they surrounded the small television. Ivan heard an ugly sound from next to him and saw that Lemuel, the man he had been practicing with, was fighting against the sobs rising up in his throat. He realized that the black students had moved together unconsciously, leaving a buffer zone between him and them. Between the person who looked like the attackers on television and those who looked like most of the protestors being beaten. Sofie still stood beside him. Her expression was unreadable. She didn't cry like the man on the other side of him, but there was something infinitely sadder in the way she regarded the screen. He thought of how he'd felt when shown pictures of emaciated concentration camp survivors, knowing they had committed the same crime as him: being born Jewish. When it came to the pictures of the piles of bodies, he'd always closed his eyes, afraid of seeing some familiar feature that revealed his grandparents or his aunt Ilona or any of the other Friedmans who hadn't escaped the machinations of the Third Reich. Seeing those images in black and white, and in the black ink tattooed on some of the worshipers at synagogue, had made everything real in a way his imagination could not.

"They're not allowing the Riders to exit." The reporter talked slowly as if considering whether each word could actually be true whether his eyes were deceiving him. Ivan felt something wrap around his arm—Sofie's hands had clasped his biceps, seemingly just to hold herself up. They all stared on as the fire engulfed the bus. Another explosion sounded and the mob cleared from around the bus, allowing the passengers to escape.

"Shit." Ivan didn't know who said it. It could have been him. The moment of elation for the people escaping was short-lived as the mob closed around them and began beating and kicking and tearing; they were out for blood, and they got it. The crowd surrounded a white man with thick horn-rimmed glasses as he stumbled off the bus coughing; a man teed up with a metal pipe like he was at baseball practice and swung at his face, laughing as the man with glasses crumpled to the ground. As if on signal, the police finally moved in.

David shut the television off. His shoulders heaved, and for a moment Ivan thought he was preparing some kind of rousing battle cry. Instead, his voice was broken when he turned to the other

students and spoke. “This is what we are fighting against, brothers and sisters. Do you understand that these people see us as subhuman? Or worse: humans who might be just as good as them.” He glanced at Ivan. “They’ll see you as a race traitor. They’ll want to give it to you good.”

“Consider me Judas, then,” Ivan said. “I’ve heard all the stories of how my people knew Kristallnacht and the purges and something even worse were coming, but everyone hoped it could be avoided somehow. Hope alone can’t change things in this country. You’re trying to do that, and I intend to help.”

“I’m still in,” Sofie said. “I imagine that after seeing that, you’re going to have a lot more volunteers.”

“And a lot more enemies,” Henrietta added.

“Do not fear or be dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours but God’s,” David said. His voice was strong again, and the vehemence of it raised goosebumps on Ivan’s arms despite his neutrality when it came to religion. “Everybody join hands,” David said, and the students obeyed. “Let’s sing, together, and know that just as our voices are joined, our will shall be joined, too.”

Sofie’s hand was warm in Ivan’s as the song began, but her voice was low as if she had muted herself. He wanted to lean down to hear her, but just being able to touch her was enough. “Let the circle, be unbroken, by and by, by and by.”

Ivan hadn’t known what he’d expected when he volunteered, but as the words of his new compatriots mingled with his own deep voice, he was reminded of the sense of connection and unity he only experienced on the high holy days or on those trips to synagogue that had grown few and far between.

“We’ll meet here again tomorrow night,” David said. He pulled Henrietta close, and they swayed there, supporting each other. “Would you mind leading a session at tomorrow night’s meeting?” David asked. “I would appreciate it. Fisticuffs aren’t my forte.”

Ivan nodded. The pride that surged through him could have been considered a sin, but then again even the Talmud conceded that a scholar must possess at least an eighth of an eighth of pride in his studies. It wasn’t often that people looked at what he had spent years studying, as diligently as any Torah scholar, as something useful to the greater good. His own father compared him to a common thug, as if the Jewish boxers who’d dominated the sport for years had meant nothing. But now Ivan had a chance to help people, and one person in particular.

Sofie hugged her arms around herself, her earlier vim and vigor gone. “I—I can’t come tomorrow night. I have to have dinner with my father. He’s not happy about me coming here and…” She shrugged,

and her full mouth compressed into a thin line as she held back some emotion. Ivan didn't know what words she struggled for in trying to describe what was happening with her father, only that he felt them, too.

"You busy in the afternoon?" he asked her.

She regarded him suspiciously, and Ivan hated that she didn't trust him, but loved that she was smart enough not to.

"I have a class in the morning, but I'm free in the afternoon. Why?"

"Because if what we just saw is any indication of how bad things can go, you're going to have to learn how to take a hit." He looked at the other students. "And if you can't come tomorrow night, you'll be missing some important information."

He knew that last line was a little manipulative. The Sofronia he'd known hated missing out on anything, and hated not having all the information available to her. She'd even refused to read their children's books out of order because she wanted to know what happen in the rest of the series.

"Do you want to swing by my place after your class? Or would you prefer I come to you?" He tried to make the interaction as normal as possible, like it made complete sense for the two of them to be alone.

"I'm not sure about being alone in a house with you," she said.

Ivan ran a hand through his hair. "I guess I can pretend to attack you outside and we can see how that goes."

"The same way it always goes when a white man attacks a black woman," she said, a hand dropping onto her hip. "No one would do anything to help me and you could go on about your day afterward."

Ivan felt her words like a hard right to the jaw. He knew that the bond they shared was based on childhood friendship, and that many things had happened to them both in the intervening time. But for her to lump him in with *them*, with men who would hurt her because they could, was a low blow. The fact that everyone around them was not pretending to be otherwise engaged meant they felt the sting of her words too.

"I'm sorry. That wasn't fair to you when you're just trying to help." Her lips pressed into a line. "Do you still live…" She paused and Ivan filled in the blank. *Where Miss Delia died?* "…at the same address?"

He nodded.

"I'll be there around three," she said. Ivan realized he had expected her to say no, and tried not to show how surprised he was by her response.

"I'll be waiting," he said.

Chapter 6

Dragging your feet wasn't very ladylike, but Sofie was second-guessing her decision as she walked down the tree-lined street leading up to the Friedmans' house. She didn't want to see Ivan and his mother and be reminded of all that she'd lost—and what more she might lose if her father continued to greet her with a stony silence.

She hated that a part of her was looking forward to being visiting the scene of the most awful moment of her life. She'd never returned after her mother's death; that meant she'd never gotten to taste Mrs. Friedman's delicious food again, or to tell her how Mama had loved the challenge of mastering the specialized cuisine.

She rang the bell, then adjusted the plate of cookies she had baked the night before when thoughts of Ivan and sit-ins and bloodied students had stolen her sleep. She often turned to the comfort of her mother's recipe box when she was unsettled. She knew it was strange, but the notes were so detailed she felt like her mother had channeled some of herself into those family secrets, as if she had known that she wouldn't be around to show Sofie just how long to simmer the collards or how much sugar she meant by "to taste." Sofie sometimes pretended her Mama was with her as she whisked and chopped and folded, only it didn't always feel like pretend.

Ivan pulled the door open then, and the smile Sofie had plastered on crumbled away. He stood before her freshly showered and smelling of ninety-nine point forty-four percent pure goodness. His hair was still wet, his face freshly shaved. That was all well and good, but her gaze was drawn to his body: the ropy muscles of his arms, the broad chest—Sofie's lingering sense of decorum didn't allow her to look any further down than that.

"Hey! Come on in." He stood aside, and she was forced to pass close to the warmth that radiated off him. She didn't know why he was affecting her this way. She'd been close to him more than once already, but there had been other people around before. The delicious smell of onions and garlic was emanating from the kitchen, and she realized it was Friday. His mother was probably making the stew for Shabbos. His mother or whomever they had hired in place of hers. Sofie felt a little bit nauseated at the thought of stepping into the kitchen and seeing another black woman working there, as if her mother were easily replaceable.

"I made some cookies," she said. "Is your mother in the kitchen? I can bring them in to her."

The door slammed shut and the effortless sex appeal Ivan had exuded shifted as he hunched in on himself. He cleared his throat.

“Mom died two years ago. Cancer.”

“Oh! Oh.” Tears pressed at her eyes suddenly. She hadn’t seen Mrs. Friedman in years but the news still hurt. Another part of her childhood, gone. Ivan been there for her in those awful moments when she’d lost her own mother. Who had been there for him?

She lifted a hand, but it hung in the air between them, not quite able to span the distance. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

He nodded, then lifted the plate of cookies from her other hand and walked toward the kitchen. She followed behind him, searching for something to say to make up for her atrocious error. She was surprised to see him place the cookies on the table, pick up a large knife, and begin chopping potatoes. Her arrival had obviously interrupted him. “Sorry. I just need to throw this stuff into the slow cooker. Dad still hasn’t learned how to make cholent, and if I don’t cook it, he just won’t eat tomorrow.”

She pulled up a seat at the kitchen island, warding off memories of so many years before. It was strange to remember the young, frail Ivan who would sit next to her at this very counter and listen to her mother’s stories as she looked at him before her, all grown up and cooking for the family himself. “That’s nice of you,” she said. “Sometimes I think the same thing about my father. I try to make something good most nights. Otherwise, he would just survive on TV Dinners.”

Ivan chuckled, then reached behind him with the knife and used it pull open the freezer, which was stuffed to the gills with the distinctive frozen meals. Sofie gave a bittersweet laugh.

“Women from our synagogue cook extra food and bring him their ‘leftovers,’ but he hates eating that. He says it makes him feel ungrateful when he thinks their food isn’t as good as my mom’s.” Ivan dumped the barley, potatoes, and beans into the slow cooker, then took the onions off the stove and scraped them in as well. “The only person who could ever match Mom in the kitchen was Miss Delia. She never stopped talking about her, you know. Even on her death bed she said, ‘If Delia were here she could show these di skeynes how to make some real matzah ball soup!’”

Sofie smiled. She remembered how hard Mrs. Friedman had been on her mother during the first few weeks. Mama came home complaining about the woman every night. But when Mama had shown her she was no one’s fool in the kitchen, they’d developed a type of friendship. As much friendship as could exist between a servant and the woman she worked for.

Ivan washed his hands and wiped them off on his jeans. “Okay, you ready to get to it?”

Sofie nodded, and felt the oddest trembling in her stomach as he

approached her. She didn't think she'd ever paid much attention to the way a man walked before, but she watched the play of muscle as he took each step and how his arms swung in a way that projected an unconscious self-confidence. He gave her his chip-toothed grin as he stopped in front of her and nodded in the direction of her hands. "You should take those off. I wouldn't want to be responsible for sullying your gloves."

"They'll likely be destroyed at a real sit-in," she said.

He took her hand from where it rested on the counter and undid the small button at the base of her glove, and it was if that one flick of his finger released a torrent of tingling heat that spread from her wrist to her arm and through the rest of her body. "I can only be responsible for my own actions," he said. "And I don't want to be the man who shredded these dainty little things." He pinched the fingertip of the glove and gave it a tug, and Sofie felt the responding pull between her thighs.

She should have grabbed her hand away from him then, as soon as that first bolt of pleasure went through her, but she simply stared up at him with wide eyes as he gave four more swift, gentle pulls and freed her hand from its encasement. He took the other hand, moving one step forward as he did, so that now the roughness of his denim pants rubbed against her knee as he worked.

Sofie knew he could see her hand shaking, and her chest rising and falling heavily, and the way her knees were pressed together. She was embarrassed, but that didn't mean she wasn't disappointed too when he pulled her second glove off the final digit, her pinky, and laid it down besides its mate.

She forced herself to look up at him, and was happy to see that his cheeks were flushed beneath his fading bruises. Ivan may have been cool now, but not so cool that she didn't affect him, too. "Okay, we should go into the living room."

She stood on wobbly legs and clicked after him across the tiled kitchen floor. "Should I take off my shoes, too?" she asked. It was a brazen thing to ask, but her fingers were still tingling from his touch.

Ivan stopped and looked back over his shoulder. His gaze fixed on her pointy black leather heels, then up her stocking leg until her skirt obstructed his view. His voice was low and his gaze intense when he answered, and his words made her throat go dry.

"Leave your heels on."

Chapter 7

Half an hour later, they sat stiffly beside each other on the couch.

"It's okay. I'm sure it happens to the best of boxers," she said. Mortification clenched him by the back of the neck.

He hadn't thought through the most important part of the training: pretending to hit her. He couldn't do it. He couldn't even bring himself to throw a fake, loose-fisted punch that he knew would miss her by a mile. Sofie had stood in front of him, eyes wide and lovely, lips soft and distracting, and his fists had hung limply at his side. And now they sat in awkward silence.

"This is ridiculous," Ivan said. He grabbed Sofie's hand and stood, pulling her up after him. When he turned she was giving him that ingénue look again, the one he usually only saw on the screen at the Saturday matinee. In the films, a look like that was an invitation, but he doubted Sofronia was offering him any such thing. He placed his hands on her shoulders. "First things first: you need to relax." He gave her a gentle shake to loosen her muscles, which had tensed up as soon as he laid his hands on her. "You need to be a little soft to take a hit; leave a little give so the impact won't hurt as much."

He wished he had phrased it differently—thinking of the soft parts of Sofie was making him uncomfortably hard, and that wasn't what this afternoon was supposed to be about.

She nodded, but the relaxation didn't come. Instead, she started to tremble a little beneath his palms and her gaze dropped to the floor.

"No." Ivan slid his fingers under her chin and lifted her head. He didn't miss that her skin was smooth beneath his fingertips. "Maintain eye contact. If someone is about to hit you, you want to see it coming so you can act accordingly."

"Okay." She locked her gaze on his, and his stomach executed an unfamiliar twisting maneuver. It was a funny thing to look into a woman's eyes like this. Intimate encounters were nothing new for him; ladies liked a guy who could hit and punch and dominate in the ring. Caveman attraction, and all that jazz. But no one had ever looked at him the way Sofie did, that's for sure. Her eyes were full of contradictions: fear and longing, humor and distaste. Maybe he'd been wrong about the invitation. Maybe she was just waiting for his RSVP, like any proper lady would. Ivan's groin tightened at the thought and wisps of desire feathered down his spine.

He slid one hand over the crisp fabric that nipped in at her shoulder and then his palm was on smooth, warm skin. He cradled the back of her neck, and the way the curls at her nape tickled his palm

was enough to make him want to pull the pins out of her bun and dive his fingers into the soft mass. Instead he exhaled slowly and continued his instruction. “You can be stiff here.” He gave her neck a little squeeze. “And tuck in your chin. Yeah, like that. That way your head won’t snap back if you take one to the face.” He didn’t move his hand away; not just yet. Neither Jack nor any of the other boxers had ever touched him this gently during training, but this wasn’t the gym. This was Sofie, for Pete’s sake.

His other hand left her shoulder, ghosted past her breast, and rested on her stomach. “You should brace here, too, if someone hits you. That way the wind won’t get knocked out of you. A blow to the diaphragm while your stomach is soft can make you feel like you’re dying.”

He felt like he was dying, all right. Sofie still had her eyes locked on his, and her tongue slicked nervously over her lips. Her skin had gone hot beneath the fabric of her dress, and he could feel the way her heart was racing just above where his hand rested.

Ivan didn’t think. His fist tightened, twisting up the fabric under his hand and pulling Sofie two steps closer to him.

“Ivan.” His name was almost a question. What was the right answer? Damned if he knew.

“Last thing: roll with the punches. When something comes at you, you have to roll with it. Go in the same direction to lessen the impact.” His face was lowering as he spoke, his mouth on a slow collision course with hers. At the last minute, she turned her face to the side and back, leaving his mouth beside her ear. Disappointment rocked through him, but he said what any good trainer would say. “Good job. You’re a fast learner.”

Both of her hands came over his, pulling it closer to the soft curve of her belly. Her fingertips traced the indentations in his knuckles before she exhaled shakily and pushed his hand away. “You’re wrinkling my dress,” she whispered, then stepped back. “I should go.”

He moved away from her and she turned and marched away, hips swaying as she balanced on those pointy heels. She grabbed her bag and trotted down the hall. “Thank you very much for the lesson!” she called over her shoulder.

Ivan stood staring long after the door slammed. Sofie had learned to take a hit, so why was he the one left feeling punch drunk? He bounded up the stairs to change into his gym clothes. Only a long round with the heavy bag, and maybe a sparring match, would be able to rid him of the foolish notion that Sofie could ever be his.

Chapter 8

"They want to stop the rides," Henrietta said when Sofie walked into the community center the following Monday. Sofie was supposed to be studying at the university, but she'd gotten off the bus early and come to the community center.

"Why," she asked.

"Did you see what happened in Birmingham?" Henrietta asked. Sofie shook her head. "After beating those people half to death at the bus depot, they wouldn't let them leave. They were trapped at the airport for hours with the same mob that attacked them because no flights would take them. It's a miracle they got out of there, but now they're not going to try to reach New Orleans."

Sofie's heart dropped. "But that means…"

"That means violence took the day," David said, rubbing the crease between his eyes. He was sprawled in his chair, looking as tired as Sofie had ever seen him. "It means people will think that the movement can be stopped by bats and pipes and heartlessness."

"Well, we have to do something," Sofie said. David and Henrietta looked at her warily. After all, it was an un-Sofie-like thing to say. Heck, she was wary of herself these days. But that fire in her chest was going again, and the idea that was forming in her mind made more and more sense.

"Like what?" Henrietta asked.

"I'm feeling a mite peckish. I think I might take a trip downtown and order myself a nice hamburger." Sofie pulled on her gloves and a memory flashed in her mind, of her and Ivan pretending to go into battle during one of their childhood games. Then the memory of him unbuttoning the very same gloves the day before. She'd been out with boys before, had kissed and fumbled and explored—even good girls did that. But the way Ivan touched her had seared into her. None of the other boys had ever made her feel like that, and that just added to her guilt, because none of them had looked like Ivan either.

What is wrong with me? She couldn't be entirely upset. Whatever this madness within her was, it was about to take her to the Special K diner, and that was exactly where she needed to be.

"Sofie, we aren't prepared," David said. "I know you're upset right now, but flying off the handle isn't going to change anything."

"No, it's not. But I'm tired of being afraid." The words came out almost a shout, and she calmed herself. David wasn't responsible for Jim Crow, or for the way her father tried to cut off everything he deemed bad about her, like eyes off a potato. "I'm tired of living like this," she said more calmly. "And I refuse to let any bigot in Richmond

sit and pat himself on the back and think for *one minute* that people like us got put in their place. I'm going, David. I'm a grown woman and I don't need your permission to do as I wish."

That thought was a revelation to her. She hated that her father was mad, but she only needed his love, not his permission. If he would deny her the former, well, that said more about him than it ever would about her.

"Well, you do need one thing from me," David said.

"And what's that?" Henrietta asked, standing beside Sofie. Her friend had put on her Jackie Kennedy sunglasses, which meant she was ready for serious business.

David held up his key ring and jingled it. "A ride."

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"Hell and damnation," David said, as they walked into the popular Greek diner. Sofie knew he was more than nervous if he was getting biblical with his cursing.

Sofie noted with the bit of humor that was available through her fear that Elvis's "It's Now or Never" was playing on the jukebox when they walked in.

The place was packed, but they had just seen four men get up and leave the lunch counter from their perch outside. Purpose was the only thing that had carried Sofie in through the door after Henrietta, the support that kept her legs from wobbling and giving way as they approached the counter. The place was noisy, raucous, full of teenagers enjoying their weekend and families taking a break from a day of shopping downtown. The happy chatter got quieter as David took his seat. By the time Sofie dropped onto the round leather stool, a low, ugly murmur was going through the crowd, accentuated by the happy, tinkling piano of the Elvis song.

A man approached the counter, wiping his hands on his towel. Sofie's body stiffened, and then she heard Ivan's voice say "Relax," and she did that to the best of her ability. She expected the man to yell at them, to look at them with derision, but instead his eyes were filled with sadness. "Please don't do this. Not here," he said. His voice was heavily accented and shaking, but not with anger.

Once when she was a girl, a carnival had come through town; only after Sofie had been strapped into the tilt-o-whirl did she see that the operator was a boy not much older than her. The same deep, primordial terror that her life may, indeed, be over pressed down on her as she sat at the counter. She began relisting the rules of a sit-in over and over in her mind in order to calm herself.

*1.) Behave in a friendly manner.*

"Can we get three coffees, please, sir?" Henrietta asked sweetly.

"I can't," the man said. "You know I can't. Why you want to make
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my life hell?"

2.) Sit straight and always face the counter.

"Okay, we're just going to read here until you change your mind," David said with a smile. They remained silent then, each clutching a book they could use to study for finals. Sofie opened her book, but the words were so much gibberish, and she thought it would shake right out of her hands. She read the same line over and over because she didn't think she'd be able to turn the page.

"I can't let you stay," the man said. Sofie heard the scrape of chairs as patrons stood up. "They're gonna hurt me and they're gonna hurt you. I don't want things to be like this, but what can I do? I just came here a few years ago."

And you already have a diner because you have blue eyes and light skin and can pass for one of them, Sofie wanted to say. She knew the man was distraught, but that didn't change the fact that she would not stand up.

3.) Don't strike back if struck, or curse back if cursed upon.

"What do you niggers think you're doing?" a voice said from behind them. "This ain't Nashville." She could feel the people coming up behind her and realized this was one thing they hadn't practiced, this innate desire to turn and ward off a dangerous animal creeping up on you. The hairs stood up on the back of her neck, and when someone gripped her chair from behind, the word "Mama" was incomprehensibly heavy on her tongue. But her mother couldn't help her.

David had repeated a version of Psalm 118 to them as they approached the diner, and Sofie let those words fortify her. *The Lord is for us. We shall not fear. What can man do to us? The Lord is for us among those who help us; therefore, we shall look with satisfaction on those who hate us.*

A bulky frame brushed past her left side and slid into the seat, and Sofie tensed, then relaxed, preparing for a blow. "Can I get a milkshake?" a familiar voice asked. "I know things are a little hectic, but I've had a day. A malted would be perfect."

4) Don't laugh out.

The harried restaurant owner ignored Ivan and tried to calm the crowd that was getting more riled now that the interlopers at the counter were racially mixed.

Sofie inhaled the scent of Ivory soap and felt a bit of peace. Why was it that she had gone so long without Ivan in her life, but now, after just a few days, he could make her feel safe? It wasn't that he was a boxer; she didn't expect him to protect them from the men in the crowd, which was growing more agitated by the minute. He fortified something in her that David and Henrietta, her best friends,

did not. She remembered Mrs. Friedman shaking her head at their games and asking her mother, “What is this saying they have here? Two peas in a pod? That’s these two.”

“You okay?” Ivan asked in a low tone. His seat creaked beneath his weight as he settled more solidly beside her.

6.) Don’t hold conversations.

“Hush,” she said under her breath. She kept her face toward her book, but beneath the counter, Ivan’s knee pushed into hers, stopping her leg from shaking. He was giving her some of his strength. That was probably the least important thing happening in the Special K diner in that moment, but it felt like everything. When she glanced at him, he was pulling a newspaper from under his arm, whistling. He winked with his right eye, like he knew she was watching, and she turned back to her book.

“Think you’re smart?” an ugly voice said, and the book was ripped out of her hands from behind. She heard the sounds of tearing behind her, and hated that something that could be used for knowledge was being destroyed, but there was nothing she could do. She folded her hands in front of her. Beside her she heard another ugly voice say, “You wanted a milkshake?” She knew it was a different man, but the hatred distorted their voices so they all sounded the same. Gales of laughter suddenly surrounded her, and she looked at Ivan. Chocolate milkshake dripped down his hair and onto his face, but his expression was serene.

There was more laughter, and then Henrietta yelped. Her precisely flat-ironed hair was now dripping with fountain soda. A shiver went through her, and then she threw her shoulders back and stared straight ahead.

A thickly accented voice rang out over the noise. “The diner is now closed, everybody out!” A much larger man, obviously the son of the owner, was standing by the door, directing people outside. “All of you out!”

Sofie sat still as people slapped at her chair on their way out. Finally there was the jingle of the bells over the door, and then silence. The son came over and slapped a hand on the counter. “You trying to ruin us? You know how much money we lost tonight? You get out, too.”

Sofie wanted to apologize, but she refused. It was the animals who had attacked them and ruined the store who should apologize. Still, she couldn’t stop the guilt that tugged at her heart when the older man emerged with a broom, eyes rimmed with red. “Enough, Constantine. They’re doing what they have to, like I did what I had to in my day. You were born here, so you have no idea.” The man sighed. “I understand, but…please leave now. I have a lot of cleaning

to do."

Sofie saw David stand, and followed his lead. As they filed out, her stomach felt sour and her heart heavy. Had they accomplished anything, or would this count as another loss for the movement?

She didn't have time to think on it, because a glass bottle crashed at her feet, and then another.

"Run!" Henrietta screamed, and then they were off. Without thinking, her hand slipped into Ivan's and they careened through the midday crowd, pushing past amazed onlookers as angry shouts followed them down the street.

"This way." He pulled her into an alley between a pet shop and a pharmacist and kept running. He turned left and then right and then boosted her over a fence, something she hadn't done since her tomboy days.

Her stockings were ruined, her gloves were shredded, and her heart was beating out of her chest. What had she done? What had she gotten herself into?

There was a thud as Ivan landed in the small enclosure behind her. They both breathed heavily for a moment, but there were no pounding footsteps heading in their direction, no hoots and hollers from people who wanted to do them harm.

"Did they hurt you?" He stalked toward her with that intense gaze that made her feel like the center of his universe.

"No," she said. The word was barely out of her mouth when his mouth came down on hers and her mind went blank.

The man could kiss. Sofie had been kissed before and kissed well, but this was something entirely different. His lips were warm and smooth, and so, so soft. It evoked a sort of tenderness in her that a man so strong, who brawled with other men by choice, could have such sweet, soft lips. They rubbed over hers, tantalizing, before his tongue swept into her mouth. He tasted of the milkshake that had been tossed on him, and of peppermint candy.

Sofie knew she should pull away, but instead let him kiss her. Spirals of pleasures cycloned through her body, picking up the anger and fear and adrenalin surging through her and churning it all into lust. She didn't want to think of the men who hated her and the things they'd called her. She didn't want to feel that sick sadness anymore. In Ivan's arms, all of that faded away, leaving only pleasure. His large hands encircled her waist holding her in place as he kissed her senseless. One hand slid up her back, cradling her neck as he transferred his kisses from her mouth, to her jaw, to her neck.

Sofie touched her neck every day—bathing, applying perfume—but never had she known it could feel so damned good. The skin there seemed oversensitized, so that Ivan's every touch multiplied and raced

off through her like the Pony Express, carrying messages of the pleasure to come to the further regions of her body.

The brush of his lips converted the fluttering in her belly into something warm and fluid as molasses that settled warmly between her legs. The scrape of his stubble made her rub her thighs together to assuage the need for touch. And then his teeth grazed her skin as his hand moved up to cup her breast, and she bucked in his arms at the jolt of it. His thumb ran over the pebbled nipple through the material of the dress, slowly caressing as his tongue circled around that wonderful spot where neck and shoulder met.

"Jesus," she moaned, the word the only thing that could convey what Ivan's mouth and hands were doing to her. The power and the glory, indeed.

"Wrong Jew," he said, and kissed her again.

Sofie faintly heard a tinkling noise that began to pull her back to reality, but the sound of the back door of a shop opening seemed to reach her in slow motion. She didn't push Ivan away until after she heard a man call out his name angrily, until after she heard the ugly word "schvartze," yet another derogatory term for her people, mixed in with an angry deluge of Yiddish. Ivan pulled away from her.

The magic of the moment disappeared and Sofie realized that they were standing behind a dumpster, like so much refuse. Shame flooded her when she saw the expression of disgust on the man's face, but even being caught red-handed like a back-alley hussy couldn't strip her of her manners.

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Friedman." She turned to Ivan, who looked like he had much more impolite things to say to his father. "I have to get home."

"I'll give you a ride," he said.

"Not in my car you won't." Mr. Friedman moved to block his path.

"I paid that car off with my own money. I'll never use it again after tonight, but I'll be damned if I let Sofie get hurt by the bigots who just chased us down." Ivan shook his head. "You're just as bad as them. Worse. You know what it is to be on the other side, you know what it is to be hated for no reason, and you still can't sympathize. You think they cared about the difference between a Sephardi and a schvartze in the camps?"

He walked around his father, as if he couldn't bear to be in his vicinity, and Sofie followed behind him. By the time she reached the car, she was shaking. She didn't know if it was anger or shock as the adrenalin left her.

"Sof."

She ignored his voice.

"Sofie. Please look at me."

She turned her head slowly. She wanted to hate him, as his father's ugly slur echoed in her head, but she also wanted to take out her handkerchief and wipe off his face. It seemed that when it came to Ivan, conflicting emotions were the rule and not the exception.

"You need to go home and clean up, and I need to go home and be told what an ungrateful child I am." She sighed, feeling a weariness that went deep into her bones.

"In that case, you should understand that fathers and their children often have differences of opinion."

"Difference of opinion?" She whirled, suddenly angry. "Your father thinks I'm a schvartze. A nigger."

He started the car. "And your father thinks Jews are cheap, hook-nosed bastards. At least, that's what he called my parents when he came to collect the last of your mother's things. 'Cheap, hook-nosed bastards who worked Delia to the grave,' but I might be paraphrasing. It was a long time ago."

Sofie sucked in a breath. All of the little asides her father had made over the years ran through her mind. How the mechanic tried to "Jew him down" instead of saying he haggled. How he'd always referred to the Friedmans as *those people*. "So, what? Is that supposed to excuse what your father said?" Sofie asked.

"Nope," Ivan replied, and his calm riled her all the more. "But it excuses us. I'm going to have words with my father later, but I won't be held responsible for his."

Sofie sat in her seat, feeling as if she were being torn in two. She had stood up for herself today, and she had been attacked for it, just like before. Ivan had been with her just as before, too. Sofie was waiting for the wrath of God to rain down on her now. Wasn't that what happened when she took a little something for herself? But the wrath of Mr. Friedman was nothing compared to what she'd been through. And Ivan was still beside her now, glancing at her with a warm seriousness as he navigated her home.

"Why did you kiss me?" she asked quietly. She couldn't control anything else in the world, despite how much she wanted to, but she could control what happened between them. A few days ago she wouldn't have even considered such a thing a possibility, but now she desperately wanted to hear his answer, and not only so she could discount it.

"Because you're beautiful. God, you're beautiful." The words rasped out of him like they were painful, and instead of fire in her chest, Sofie felt a cool fluttering sensation. "Because you're smart and sexy and strong as hell, and you've got everyone fooled but me. I see you in there behind the quiet voice and the pillbox hats, Sofronia. And

I'm still here waiting."

Sofie opened her purse and pulled out a handkerchief. She reached out and gingerly wiped away at the milkshake that had spread over his face. It was the only thing she could think to do besides bend over and weep from the blow of such an unexpected kindness. It seemed the last years of her life had been a *Twilight Zone* episode in which she'd been stuck in someone else's life. She'd heard all about how wonderful Sofie was from behind the carefully constructed mask, which of course meant that her, the *real* her, was the opposite of wonderful. Didn't it? Ivan didn't seem to think so, and that affected her even more deeply than their kiss had.

His face was in profile to her as he drove, but she saw at least half of his smirk as she wiped the remains of the dessert drink from his hair.

"Searching for horns?" he asked, trying to make her laugh. It worked, even though something about the way he said it, with that half-quirked smile of his, made her stomach somersault too.

"Don't be silly, you don't have horns," she said, but she dropped the handkerchief and thrust her fingers into his thick hair anyway, the slide of it against her fingers a strange, smooth sensation. It was thick and curly, but in a different way from her own. She ran her fingernails over his scalp, and watched in amazement as he shivered.

"Why'd you check if you were so sure?" he asked when she pulled her hand away. His voice had the same joking tone, but was huskier now, activating something in Sofie that was receptive to this new octave that hinted at darkened bedrooms and the things that happened in them.

"Maybe I just wanted to touch you," she said, shocked that she had told him the God's honest truth. Henrietta would never let her live this down if she told her, and her father would about kill her if he found out. But something in Ivan crowded out what anyone else would think, and what the world could do to them.

She pulled her hand away as the car pulled to a stop in front of her house. She could see the light on in the living room and the shadowy form of her father through the curtains, and sighed.

Ivan's hand encircled her wrist as she moved to open the door. "The feeling is mutual," he said in a tone that traveled straight from her ears to her core. He raised her hand to his mouth and kissed the heel of it. It was an unlikely place, and it made her wonder what other unlikely places his mouth would feel just as good against.

"Goodnight, Sof," he said after she'd stepped out and shut the door, quietly so as not to draw too much attention. "If I had to get chased by an angry racist mob, I'm glad it was with you."

She let out a shocked laugh, and slammed her hand over her

mouth.

She didn't watch him as he drove away. She saved that bit of laughter and warmth inside of her as she pulled herself back together. Back straight, shoulders dropped. She may have looked like a ragamuffin, but her poise would be impeccable when she walked into her home and faced her father.

Chapter 9

Ivan knew he should have gone back to the store to pick up his father, but he had been so angry and confused that he hadn't wanted to share the small space of the car that still smelled of Sofie. Part of him was scared of how angry he was at his father. Not of losing his temper with his dad, but of losing his respect for him.

He'd driven home instead. As the steaming spray of the shower rinsed away the schmutz that'd been poured over him by those assholes at the diner, he remembered the way Sofie's eyes had gone round with fear when the bottle landed at her feet, and the way they had been liquid heat just before he kissed her in the alleyway. When he thought of his father, of the way he'd reacted to seeing him with Sofie, Ivan felt a deep shame descend upon him. It was the same shame that had haunted him since that day Sofie had protected and then lost her mother, as if his cowardice had brought down some wrath upon them all.

That kind of shame was an albatross. He'd borne its weight for so long—becoming bigger, stronger, and harder to injure had lightened his load but not removed it.

If he really thought about it, it was that shame that had driven him to the nonviolent resister meetings. He knew that he could stop a man with his sledgehammer fists and his hard left hook. But Jack had been wrong when he said throwing punches was Ivan's favorite thing; there was something redemptive about taking a punch that he couldn't explain, and to be able to do so for the greater good…

He was shadowboxing in his room when he heard the door open and his father return. His fists dropped to his sides as he heard his father's shuffling steps. Each one sounded like it only occurred through some extraordinary act of willpower, and through his anger Ivan reminded himself that he wasn't the only one who carried an invisible burden.

He walked down into the kitchen and saw his father standing in front of the sink, where water ran into an overflowing cup as he stared through the window. Mr. Friedman turned his head, as if he hadn't noticed his son walk into the room. "Ivan." He paused, his features hardening from soft and sad to defensive.

"What happened earlier today was a *shandeh un a charpeh*," Ivan said. The Yiddish wasn't usually the first thing his brain went to, but he didn't know the words in English that could convey his disappointment in his father.

"Yes," his father said. He put the glass down without drinking it. "It was shameful and disgraceful to be engaging in relations with that

girl out in the open like a man with no sense of morality."

"Oh please, Pop," Ivan said. "If it had been Libby Weinberger out there with me, you wouldn't have been so quick to judge."

"First the boxing, now taking up with these rabble-rousers. You're not a schvartze—why don't you let these people fight their own battles? Do you think they would've help us if the Nazis had made it to these shores?" Mr. Friedman rubbed at his brow. "When you were a boy you said that all you wanted to do was become a scholar, but then everything changed. Sometimes I wish we had never come to this place. Maybe it's being here that makes you such a disobedient son."

Ivan wished his father's words didn't have the ability to cut through him like a sharpened stone. He wanted to turn away from the anger and confusion he saw in his father's eyes, but he was a man now and would face this as a man would.

"You want a scholar? Chew on this: whether a person is gentile or Jew, they're entitled to *Kavod HaBriyot*—human dignity. Millions of people are being denied their dignity right now, and if I can do something to help change that, I will."

"What do you want? That I should be happy that you'll risk your life for the same people who come into my shop and call me a cheap Jew to my face?"

"Yes!" Ivan said. "People shouldn't have to be perfect to be seen as worthy of empathy."

His father stared at him, then shook his head. "I don't understand you. I don't understand anything anymore. I'm going to go talk to Rabbi Hirschman."

"Good. Make sure you ask him what he thinks of you being a bigot."

His father flinched and Ivan knew he had gone too far.

"Pop—"

The door slammed shut.

Ivan dragged himself up to his room, but he felt even more like a stranger in his own home than usual. He didn't know what had just happened between him and his father, but he felt like he'd just gone ten rounds only to be awarded a draw. He felt alone, and he knew there was only one way he wouldn't.

He picked up the phone beside his bed and dialed. When Sofie's voice came through, he smiled, in spite of everything.

"Hey. It's me. Did David and Henrietta get home okay?" he asked.

"Yes, they did. One of their friends was driving by and pulled them into the car." Her voice was stiff, and for a moment he thought she was angry with him. That thought hurt him far more than it should have, but when she remained on the line instead of hanging up, he realized she wasn't alone.

“Did things go okay with your father?” he asked.

“No.” That was all she would give him. Her polite distance was making him miss her more than if he hadn’t called.

He leaned back into his pillow. “I know this is probably crazy, given everything that happened today, but I can’t stop thinking about that kiss. I think it was probably the best kiss I’ve ever had in my life.”

There was a long pause, then he heard her breath shake on an exhale. That one little sound went through him like a static shock.

“Well, I don’t have much experience in such matters, but…I feel the same way.”

Those words eased past all of the ugliness of his encounter with his father, past the fear that had pumped through him when he thought Sofie might get hurt by the crowd.

“Sofie.” He wasn’t one for emotional displays, but it seemed that every minute that went by without him revealing how he felt was a moment lost. “I know you have lots more important stuff to worry about, but I’d like to take you out. I understand if you say no, but I can’t stop thinking about you. I never have, if I’m being perfectly honest.”

He thought about all the times over the years he’d seen someone who looked like her. A sudden hope would pound a ridiculous beat in his veins at the possibility…of what? It wouldn’t be a second chance, really, but an opportunity to see what could happen.

He heard footsteps; the click of her heels on wood floor. Ivan held his breath, waiting for her to reject him. Their kiss had been amazing, but why would a woman like Sofie want anything to do with him?

“You know of someplace that we can go without starting a riot?” Her voice was quiet, like she was trying not to be overheard. Still, the playfulness in the tone of her serious question buoyed him.

“I have an idea,” he said. “You free before church?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll pick you up at eight, then.”

“Make it seven,” she said. “Bye.”

Ivan sat staring at the phone. Maybe he was crazy, but he was pretty sure she’d agreed to a date.

Chapter 10

Sofie slipped through the doorway and out into the cool breeze of the Sunday morning dawn. She'd left a note for her father, and she prayed that the early hour she'd chosen meant that neither he nor her neighbors would see her slip into the Buick as it pulled in front of her house. She was dressed in her favorite outfit, a brown pencil skirt she'd spent hours sewing but never worn outside her room paired with an ivory shell. The little ruffles down the front of the shirt were both girlish and a hint at her feminine curves, so she offset it with a beige cardigan lest anyone else at church think her a hussy. After the way Ivan had made her feel, she was thinking maybe being a hussy wasn't such a bad thing.

"Hey," she said, nerves jangling as she settled into the seat and Ivan pulled away, taking them to some unknown destination. The smell of coffee and eggs wafted from the back of the car, making her stomach rumble.

"Hey," he said. The tight awkwardness of her greeting was contrasted by the smoothness of his deep voice. "I picked up breakfast for us. Milkshakes are apparently a great hair conditioner, but I decided I'd rather have food in me than on me today."

She laughed, even though it was a crazy thing to laugh about. They could have been killed the day before. Maybe she laughed because they hadn't been.

"Where are we going?" she asked. She wasn't afraid, at least not of Ivan.

"There's only one place I could think of where we could hang out without worrying too much," he said with a shrug. "It's only slightly better than the dumpsters from yesterday, so I understand if you don't want to stay."

He pulled up in front of a small brick building adorned with a sign that read "Jack's Brick House." A peeling painting of boxing gloves hung from the door, and junk that looked like castoffs from a mail-order fitness regimen littered the side of the building.

"I see what you mean by 'slightly,' but I'm guessing this is better than getting chased down Franklin Street."

She stepped out onto the cracked pavement, walking on tiptoe so her ivory pumps didn't get caught in any cracks. Ivan knelt and rummaged under a tire that was strewn in the grass, producing a key he then used to open the door.

"Are you supposed to be here?" Sofie asked. "I'm fine with breaking the law for a good cause, but a quiet breakfast isn't one of."

"Jack knows I come here when I need alone time." Ivan walked

in, and she followed behind him. The enticing smell of breakfast was replaced by the smell of old sweat and leather, a combination that wasn't as bad as she'd imagined.

"Is there where you bring all the girls who are too dark to share a pop with at the five and dime?" Sofie asked as she sat in the folding chair Ivan directed her toward. She didn't mean for it to come out sounding like that—annoyed and accusatory—but she was risking a lot by trusting him enough to blindly follow him into the morning. If she was just another conquest, she deserved to know.

He dropped into the seat next to her and had the nerve to grin. "Would it make you jealous if I said yes?" he asked, handing her a warm paper cup of coffee. When she quirked a brow, he shook his head. "This gym is like my place of worship. I've been coming here since I was thirteen, and probably spent more time here than anywhere else. If I bring a woman here, black or white, it's serious." He took a sip of coffee and pinned her with that intense gaze. "You're the first."

Sofie ignored the deeper meaning of his words and the way she wanted them to be true. But they couldn't be true, could they? "Ivan, there are a pair of crusty gym socks under my seat. This hardly rates as a first date, let alone a serious one."

For the first time since they'd reconnected, he pulled his gaze away from her in embarrassment. Regret stabbed at her that she'd been the one to make him feel foolish—she knew well enough what that felt like.

She fiddled with the edge of her coffee cup. "I didn't mean that. I'm glad to be here, crusty socks and all. Just…don't you think you're moving too fast?"

Ivan gave a short laugh and shook his head. "Let me give you a tour of the place." He was his usual playful and flirtatious self as he showed her around, even though Sofie could tell something was on his mind. He pointed out awards he and other boxers at the gym had won, showed her pictures of him sweaty and bloodied after victories. It was one thing to know Ivan was a fighter, but to see it…

He even moved differently in the gym, like a predator that struts through its own territory and knows no fear. And he had reason for his pride. He walked her through his daily workout, and when he gave a brief demonstration of how to use the heavy bag, Sofie felt warmth that had nothing to do with the coffee she gulped rush through her body.

"Your…stamina is impressive," she said.

He grinned at her, and Sofie wondered just how it was possible for a man's mouth to be so enticing.

"I've been training since I was twelve, Sof. I'm the reigning

champ for the region, so yeah, I've got good stamina." For a moment she wondered what had driven him to this violent sport, and then it clicked. Ivan had been weak, and now he was strong. That horrible moment from their past hadn't only affected her, it seemed. She wondered if he thought about that day as often as she did, but she refused to ruin the morning with that sadness.

"Reigning champ? You should really mention these things earlier when you're trying to get a girl to go steady with you," she teased.

He walked toward the ring and mounted the raised platform with ease. Once inside, he struck a Mr. Universe pose. "Well, I'm defending the title next weekend, if you want to see me fight."

The thought both thrilled and frightened her. What would it mean if she said yes? Would it mean she was his girl? How would people react if when he looked out into the crowd, it was her that he gazed at with affection? Sofie found she didn't care as much as she should have. For the moment, they were alone and Ivan was waiting for her, hand outstretched.

"Want to see what it's like from the inside?"

She'd thought she would be turned off by the smell and the boys' club atmosphere of the place, but she had to admit it was exciting, not least because she was alone with Ivan. She stepped out of her shoes and took his hand, giving a yip as he pulled her up and into the ring without even mussing her clothing.

"Wow," she said as she walked across the taut canvas. She bounced a bit, testing its give, and threw a few playful jabs his way. "You must feel like a king when you're in here with people cheering for you."

His eyes tracked her as she moved, like she was quarry that he didn't plan on letting escape.

"It has its perks," he said, walking toward her. She moved backward in response, following the moves of some pre-scripted dance between them. She didn't think Ivan walked toward his opponents like this as he backed them up against the ropes.

"Tell me something, Sofie." The tone of his voice made her breath catch. It was deeper, more sultry, and he know exactly how to wield it. "Yesterday you told me that you were the one who convinced David and Henrietta to do that sit-in. You were the one who decided it was the right time to act. How long did it take you to come to that decision?"

Sofie felt like an animal that sees the snare tightening right before its capture. That feeling should have frightened her, but that wasn't why her heart was racing. "It just…happened. I just knew it was the right thing to do, and I trusted what I was feeling. For the first time in forever, I didn't second-guess myself or think of the proper thing to

do."

Ivan moved closer. Her gaze was locked with his, but she felt the rope along her back vibrate as he grabbed it on either side of her.

"You're telling me that you rushed into a situation that could have gotten you kicked out of school, left you with a permanent record, or killed you, all based on a feeling?" His words were liquid insinuation. When she nodded, he tugged at the rope, bouncing her closer to him.

"I guess you could say rushing things isn't always such a bad idea then, huh?" He leaned down and kissed her, and again she felt the touch of his mouth in every part of her body. Her hands flattened over the hard muscles of his chest, and she felt his pecs jump as her palms made contact, like she was electrifying him.

His tongue eased a gentle entry, completely at odds with the coiled strength she felt in him, and she allowed it. When she opened for him, the gentleness faded. His tongue searched out hers with long, rough strokes. She knew his lips were soft, but they felt anything as they pressed against hers. One of his hands left the rope to cup her face as he kissed her into submission.

"Sofie." Her name was a plea. "I know we've just reconnected after all this time, and there's so much to do in the world. But I feel like…I really feel like we have something here."

"That's easy to say when your hand is in my shirt," she said with a breathless laugh. She glanced down to where his fingers had slid through the sleeve holes of her silky shell, stroking the sides of her breasts through her bra.

"That it is. Should I remove it?" he asked, stroking the back of his index finger over her taut nipple. Sofie arched her back, pushing into his touch. Her cheeks were aflame at the seediness of it all, but that didn't stop the pulsing between her legs or the way her drawers were soaked through. "That's not an answer," he said, and she felt the quick slide of his hand away from her.

"No," she gasped. "Don't." She knew there was nothing ladylike at all about the pure, blatant need that made her ache for his touch, but none of that mattered now.

He made a sound of approval.

"I need you to do something for me," he said. Sofie nodded, although she didn't think she would be capable of much. His big hands were cupping her breasts, his thumbs brushing over the tender peaks in a way that made her lose all consideration for what she should or shouldn't be doing. Each caress was tightening something in her, some degenerate part of her that craved Ivan in the middle of a boxing ring instead of a fine, upstanding citizen who wouldn't want to touch her until marriage.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Tell me that I'm moving too fast. Tell me that you don't feel something crazy between us." His voice was rough as he spoke.

"If I say that, will you stop touching me?" she asked. Her hands went to his waist, and her thumbs hooked into the belt loops on his jeans. She felt him tense, and his eyes closed for the briefest moment.

"This isn't an ultimatum, Sof. If you want me to make you come right here on the mat and then part ways forever, I'll do that." He gave a deep laugh at whatever expression flitted across her face. She wasn't completely untouched, but she was fairly certain no man had ever made her come, go, or anything in between before. He ran a hand over the buttons of her blouse and began sliding them out, one by one. "But I think there's more to us than wham bam thank you ma'am."

He lowered his forehead to hers. His hands slipped into her open shirt, his rough palms encircling her the bare skin of her waist. "I've never stopped thinking of you, Sofronia. I always kept an eye out for you, hoping one day we'd see each other. Then I'd either know I was wrong and move on or this would happen."

Sofie ran her hands up his chest, over the corded muscles at his neck, and threaded her fingers at his nape. "What do you mean by *this*?"

"That I'd see you and want to be with you more than ever." His eyes were closed, like he was confessing something painful. She ran her fingertips over his long lashes, and then over the bumps at the bridge of his nose.

"Ivan…what we're doing right now? It feels right. That's what my instinct is telling me. Maybe the crazy is catching, but I want to be with you too." His eyes fluttered open and she was flummoxed by the naked need she saw in his gaze. No one had ever looked at her like that before. She swallowed and then said the first thing that came into her mind. "I want you to touch me the way you look at me, like me being nice is the last thing you're thinking of."

His head tilted quick as a flash and then his mouth was on hers. He kissed her without mercy, as if her request had allowed him to unleash the true level of his desire for her. He wasn't rough, despite his vocation, but he kissed her as if it was the last thing he would do in this world and he wanted to make sure it was done well. It was all Sofie could do to remain standing; not because her knees were weak, but because if she pulled him to the ground like she wanted to, her church clothes would be ruined and there'd be even more gossip swirling around. Ivan backed her up against a corner post and gently untucked her shirt. His hands groped at her hips and her backside, and then he threw his head back in frustration.

"Where's the zipper?" he asked.

Sofie froze. What was she doing there with him? Was she ready for whatever he had in mind? And then he smiled at her, that sheepish, chip-toothed smile, and she reached for the hidden zipper at the side of the skirt without hesitation. "I might be too good of a seamstress," she said as she worked it down.

"I've noticed," Ivan said. "Even your most demure outfit has the opposite effect on me." Then he slid his hand into the loosened waist of her skirt and rubbed her through her panties, and all thoughts of sewing techniques went out of Sofie's head. One of his hands went behind her waist to lift and support her, while his mouth forged a trail from the sensitive skin of her neck down to her thin bra. He licked through the lacy fabric she had worn with him in mind, as if some delinquent part of her had hoped he'd see it. Well, he was seeing it now, and tasting it too. He lapped at her sensitive tips, swirling his tongue around and grabbing her nipple between his teeth, even as his fingers groped their way into her drawers and massaged her sensitive nub.

"Oh," she breathed quietly. She felt more than that little sound, but her training was kicking in, even when she should be wild and free. She even had to sin like a lady.

Ivan glanced up at her and shook his head with a glint in his eye that didn't bode well for her.

"None of that dormouse stuff, Sofronia." His voice was rough and his hand picked up the pace to match. Callused fingertips pressed harder against that slit of pleasure, and a remarkable feeling flowed through Sofie, like all of the pain and sadness and happiness that she had bottled up over the years was suddenly pushing to get out all at once.

"Ivan!" Her voice was louder than she'd spoken in years, and when he sucked at her neck and curled a finger inside of her, she broke and let out a cry that even the lead in the choir couldn't have matched. Pleasure pulsed and pulsed through her body, divine and unrepentant. Her voice echoed around the gym as she sagged back against the post and simply let herself feel for once.

"Good to know those pipes are still working." He kissed the hollow of her neck as he rebuttoned her blouse, and a different kind of thrill went through her, one she had never experienced. Not during that fumbling childhood kiss with David or on the double dates she went on with Henrietta. She felt like part of a duo, two people who could change things…together.

They'd just climbed down from the ring when the front door swung open and an older black man with the body of someone half his age walked in.

His eyes widened at the sight of Sofie, and the powerful togetherness she felt started to fade as every horrible thing the man could be thinking ran through her mind. Then he smiled. “Is this the lady who’s had you distracted during your sparring matches all week?”

Sofie looked at Ivan and was shocked to see he was blushing. Blushing, after all, that talk in the ring. “Jack, Sofie. Sofie, Jack,” he said.

“Nice to meet you, young lady. And I know that pretty face is familiar for a reason.”

He handed her the morning paper. There she was, sitting primly at the Special K counter, surrounded by a mob of angry men. It seemed that her years of training had one benefit: she looked like a perfect lady, her rigidness making the men around her look even more like barbarians. David and Henrietta appeared to be studying in the midst of the melee, but Ivan was regarding her with an adoring grin. She’d seen men look at women like that before, but that Ivan was regarding her in such a way for everyone to see…

“Oh dear Lord,” she said. She could already hear her father going on about how she’d humiliated him, how his job was in jeopardy, and the other things he’d listed as he’d guilted her the night before. But something else caught her eye. NASH LEADS NASHVILLE RIDERS, a headline beside the picture screamed. Sofie clutched the paper, reading excitedly.

“The rides aren’t over,” she said, looking at Ivan. “Students are leaving from Nashville and encouraging others to ride to Mississippi. They believe that if the rides stop because of the incidents in Anniston and Birmingham, the blow to the movement will be hard to recover from.” Sofie again felt the sense of unity that was a newfound thing for her—she wasn’t the only one who felt that way. These young people in Nashville and others around the country were going to get on buses and head to Mississippi, and she was going to join them. She felt that sense of purpose flow through her again.

“Now, a lunch counter is one thing, but getting on that bus is another,” Jack said. He looked at Ivan as if he had some say in the matter, but Ivan raised his hands.

“If she wants to go, we’ll go. It’ll probably take a few days to get everything together and scrape together money for tickets. Besides, you have your finals and I have my match. We can leave Saturday morning.”

Sofie had never felt such a quick rise and drop in spirits. “A whole week? Do you know what can happen in a week? We have to go now while the world is still watching. A week from now the Soviets might launch a nuke and no one will care about whether some kids are

causing a scene in the Deep South."

"If you miss your exams, won't you flunk out for the semester?" Ivan asked. "Think about what you're saying."

Sofie felt her instinct to buckle to authority kick in. Ivan was right. She stood to lose so much if she skipped out, and not just her—her father's savings and his hope for the first generation to go to school would also be lost. But she couldn't sit in a classroom while her fellow students were making sacrifices of their own.

"There will be other semesters, Ivan. There may not be other Freedom Rides. I'm going to go, whether you decide to or not."

"You can't go by yourself," he said. He snatched the paper from her, eyes scanning the cramped newsprint. "These students have signed their last wills and testaments. They're ready to die. Are you?"

When their eyes met in challenge, Sofie felt something in her heart give way like a crumbling ledge. He didn't believe in her. She still felt his touch on her body. He'd made her feel wonderful but more wonderful still had been the thought that finally someone had thought her capable of more than being a goody two shoes. She'd been mistaken on that account.

"If that's what it takes," she said, squaring her shoulders. "I don't see how you being there will change anything. If you want to stay, stay, but don't you dare presume to know what I'm willing to give up for the movement."

"Oh no, girl," Jack said, moving to stand between them. "Don't you try to lay a guilt trip on the boy because he has priorities. He's been working toward this fight for years. Almost half his life!" The man looked so disappointed in her as if she was trying to steal Ivan's glory, that she couldn't help but think of her father.

"This isn't an ultimatum," she said weakly. Jack leaned in to hear her because her voice had barely carried to him. Had that loud, resounding cry earlier really come from her?

"I should get you to church," Ivan said. He took her arm, but his touch was like that of a stranger. She should have been angry, but the fire in her chest went cold. Disappointment replaced it, spreading through her body so that she felt sluggish as she walked out after him. She'd allowed herself to think that Ivan was different, but he was just one more person to let down, and Sofie didn't think she needed that in her life. She was full up on people who would gladly judge her.

The ride to her church was silent. As loss crept up on her, she tried to remind herself that a week ago she hadn't been thinking of Ivan at all. If after today she never saw him again, the last seven days would have been an aberration and he would recede to the vaults of her memory once again. She didn't believe that for a second, but if it got her through the rest of the day, she'd try to.

“I wish I could leave sooner than Saturday,” he said as he dropped her off three blocks from her church, as she’d requested. “But I’ve worked so hard for this. There are going to be promoters there, and this could be my chance at the big time, and a chance to help Jack get his name on the map. I’d be letting everyone at the gym down if I didn’t fight.”

Sofie tried to muster a smile, but couldn’t quite pull it off. “I understand. You’re going after what you believe in. I didn’t believe in anything for a long time but keeping my head down and not being noticed. But now I feel like I can do something, be part of something.” She took a deep breath. “I won’t wait for you.”

“Why? I don’t get the rush.” His eyes widened as if she had just dumped ice over him.

“Because even a docile girl like me has to stand up for herself sometime, and that time is right now.” She leaned in and kissed him then, despite her disappointment. If things were to go awry and the worst should occur, she didn’t want to regret not having one last touch of his soft lips. Even if things didn’t go wrong, she couldn’t expect some pledge of faithfulness after just a few days. She was sure some woman or other would be hanging around the ring to either celebrate or console him on Friday night. “Goodbye, Ivan.”

“I’ll call you later!” he called after her as she walked down the street. She hated the desperation in his voice, but she didn’t look back. She was already listing the next steps of her plan.

Chapter 11

Sofie had flinched when she walked through the doors of the church, but she hadn't combusted, despite her interlude with Ivan. If the Lord didn't see fit to punish her, she could withstand whatever anyone else had to say.

"I saw you in the paper this morning," Mrs. Pierce said when Sofie greeted her in passing. She regarded Sofie shrewdly, but then the church pianist grabbed her to discuss the same thing, and Sofie breathed a sigh of relief. The last thing she needed was the woman harping on her yet again.

After fidgeting her way through service beside her stiff and silent father, Sofie found she was actually looking forward to the after-church meetup. Everyone seemed to be buzzing about the Freedom Rides and what it meant for the movement. She heard a few dissenters, but she hoped that they were a minority. Although she didn't need the support of the majority for what she had planned.

After Melba announced that the quilting circle had been moved from Tuesday to Wednesday, Sofie stood and cleared her throat. As usual, everyone ignored her, but then she remembered her voice echoing around the gym that morning and used it.

"I'd like to make a request," she said loudly. Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at her in surprise. "Many of you are talking about the Freedom Rides today. I would like to join the movement and head down to Mississippi, but I'm afraid I don't have the funds for a Greyhound ticket. If there are any of you who see the same righteousness in this cause that I do, I would appreciate a donation. I may not be Martin or Malcolm, but I'd like to do my part to help put an end to the fear we live with every day, that one misstep can result in our injury or death just because of the color of our skin. I think these rides can help do that. Thank you."

She dropped down into her seat. She didn't know what to expect now; that was the drawback of behaving impulsively.

Sofie noticed Mrs. Pierce stand across the room. "If I may?" The words were polite, but the question was hypothetical. Everyone turned toward the woman's perfectly modulated voice.

"Now, I'm sure many of you have seen today's paper. If you haven't, you should know that our own Sofie Wallis was on the front page, seen staging a sit-in." Sofie's face went hot and her mouth went dry. She waited along with the rest of the congregation to see what Mrs. Pierce would say. Her fellow churchgoers were suspiciously quiet.

"The movement for our people's freedom has been a topic of

conversation every Sunday since I was a child. I've contributed my time and my money and my tears, and I have no regrets about that. But when I saw Sofie on that front page, looking the spitting image of her mama, I couldn't help but think, 'This child is brave! Braver than I've ever been.'" Mrs. Pierce's eyes were glossy and her usually steady voice had taken on a bit of a tremor. "We all remember Delia and how she always spoke her mind. I think…I think she would be very proud of you, girl. I'm proud of you. I'll cover the cost of the ticket, on one condition."

"What's that, Sister Pierce?" someone shouted out, saving Sofie the trouble.

Mrs. Pierce smiled. "After hearing the strength in the request she just made, straight from the diaphragm, I never want to hear her whisper-singing in my choir again."

Sofie couldn't stop the happy tears that spilled from her eyes then. She remembered the day her mother had come running from the Freidmans' kitchen, and how in the brief moment before she began to break up the fight, before she died, Mama had seen Sofie holding her own against the group of boys. All she'd wanted was to do her mother proud, and hearing those words from such an unexpected source was all the more shocking.

"I'll buy the ticket." A hand clamped on her shoulder, and Sofie held it with both of hers.

"Daddy?" She looked up to see her father with tears in his eyes that matched her own.

"I just wanted to keep you safe. You're all I have left." He sighed. "Delia always said that if I held you too close I could squeeze the life out of you, and that's what I did, isn't it?"

His shoulders heaved, and Sofie jumped and hugged him close. "You did what you thought was best," she said. That didn't take away the years of hurt, but one thing the movement was teaching her was that to move forward there had to be reconciliation. She didn't know if she forgave her father yet, but she loved him regardless.

"When are you heading out?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"There's a bus leaving tonight."

"Then let's go pack your bags. I'll take you to dinner and you can tell me all about this movement. I still think it's crazy, but if it's important to you…" He hugged her even tighter. Sofie couldn't have asked for a better gift.

Chapter 12

It was only when Sofie had boarded the bus that night, tucking her small travel bag under her uncomfortable seat, that she realized she'd never taken a trip by herself. She'd been so caught up in the end result that she hadn't paid attention to the fine details, like how frightening it would be to do this alone. The phone had started ringing as she and her father left the house, and Sofie knew without picking up that it was Ivan. She'd let it ring. She remembered the way he'd sounded when they spoke on the phone—quiet, intimate—and felt the foolish urge to cry. She didn't know how or why she had let him get to her, especially when others had been trying to line her up as a ready-made wife since she'd turned eighteen.

She craved Ivan's presence, but she told herself that she could never miss anyone more than her mother, and she'd lived through that. Barely. Getting over Ivan would be easy in comparison, even if the pain in her chest indicated otherwise.

Sofie slept more deeply than was probably wise on public transportation, and woke to the sun shining across fields of Carolina tobacco. Her throat tightened at the beauty of the sight, and at the fading dream of her mother sitting beside her through the night as the bus rolled over state lines.

The trip was uneventful, and as other young people with the same intention boarded at various stops, she learned that the police had changed their tactics; allowing mobs to beat the riders was no longer an option thanks to the news media. The trip was relatively safe now, according to them, and there was no need to guess what was waiting ahead of them. "They're sending everyone to the farm. Parchman Farm," a theology student from Georgia said when he'd settled into the seat across from her. "Still illegal, but they struck up some deal with Bobby Kennedy to make sure we don't get our heads caved in. It only took one of his men ending up in the hospital before they cared enough to do that."

Sofie had heard enough blues songs to know that Parchman was the most reviled prison in the country, but when they finally pulled into the Greyhound station in Jackson singing "We Shall Overcome," she felt no fear. She marched out with the other riders and headed straight for the Whites Only waiting room.

"We are not afraid, we are not afraid, we are not afraid, toda-aa-ay!" She pushed the words out into the cloudless spring sky, her voice dwarfing all the others, even as the police officers stepped in front of them. Through the dirt-specked glass, Sofie could see men milling about in the waiting room, the same ugly look on their faces that

she'd seen in the Special K diner.

The officers wore riot helmets, and their blue uniform shirts had stains where they'd been sweat through and then dried again. Sofie kept singing, and her voice didn't falter, but a little seed of fear sprouted in her when one of the officers pulled out his billy club and took a step forward. His eyes locked on Sofie—perhaps drawn by her voice—and he was on her in two steps.

He grabbed her roughly by the collar of the jacket she wore over her simple dress. She heard the stitching she had worked so hard on rip and then she was flying this way and that. "You think you can just come marching in here singing a happy little tune and change things?" The visor of his helmet was up and his sweaty pink face was much too close to hers. He pushed her back and then gave her an extra shove with the edge of his baton, sending her against the glass door of the waiting room. "We treat our niggers good here. You ain't doing nothing but causing trouble."

Sofie didn't have time to process the madness of the man's words. The door began to shake behind her. She could hear the taunts and leers of the men who had been waiting to greet the riders with violence, but she didn't hear the singing of her friends any longer. A shove from the door pushed her to her knees, and the burning scrape of jagged concrete surprised her into the truth. The other students had been wrong; these men were going to hurt her, Bobby Kennedy be damned.

Sofie looked up at the officer, at the hatred in his eyes that she would never comprehend. "I'm not your nigger or anyone else's," she said. "And if you think I'm causing trouble now, I'll have you know I'm just getting started."

The officer lifted his baton, but Sofie didn't look away. Her heart was pounding so hard that she could barely hear the men egging the officer on.

"Bill, what the hell are you doing? Get that girl in the goddamned wagon before a reporter shows up!" The officer lowered his baton at the command and grabbed Sofie roughly by the arm.

"Have fun at Parchman, Sweetie," he growled as he pushed her into the wagon. "Ain't no cameras there to keep you safe."

"Sofie!" Michael pulled her inside, and she felt like a lost lamb returning to the fold. "You're shaking. We turned around and you were gone. What happened?"

A woman next to her held her hand for a moment, and Sofie took a deep breath.

"I'm fine."

The wagon was hot, and they sat baking for what seemed like an eternity compared to the long bus ride. They sang We Shall Overcome

again, and that song changed to a church hymn, and then the national anthem, and then someone quickly taught them a call-and-respond song made especially for the protests. The singing fortified something in Sofie and her newfound compatriots. Their voices together became something more than just sound, but a physical force beating back the negativity around them. Sofie stank, and she needed a shower and coffee and for her First Amendment rights to be respected, but she closed her eyes and sang like it was the only thing that mattered.

"Can we take 'em over, Bill?" Sofie heard one of the officers ask.

"Get these assholes out of here," the officer who had attacked her replied. "I'm gonna have that shit music stuck in my head all night."

The door to the wagon closed and Sofie felt an inkling of real panic wiggling her belly. That officer had been right—they would have no protections at Parchman. It was where they sent people to rot. What if she never got out? What if this had all been a terrible mistake?

Her breath came in a shallow, ragged gasp, and she wanted to push the door to allow fresh air to enter. The realization that she couldn't sent her further into a panic. She jumped to her feet.

"It's okay, sister," Michael, the theological student, said. "We're here with you. God is here with us and cloaking us in His mercy. But it would also help if you sat down and took a deep breath."

Sofie tried to fight the animal instinct to kick and claw at the door, but then, as if God had, indeed, had mercy on her, it swung open. Sofie's panic fled, chased away by pure shock that gave her gooseflesh even in the sweltering wagon.

"Ivan!"

He stood there looking quite unconcerned with the police officer who was pulling him by the collar of his suit. That he was dressed so finely, in a crisp three-piece suit complete with a vest, was almost as surprising as his presence.

"Were you avoiding my calls? I tried to tell you I was coming. I *just* missed that Greyhound last night," he said. "Probably better that I had to take the Trailways, though. Staying true to the cause might have been a little difficult sitting next to you on a dark bus."

"Oh dear Lord," Sofie said, covering her eyes with her hands and dropping back into her seat. She peeped through her fingers to see Ivan crawl inside and sit on the floor at her feet, and then the door slammed shut.

"Hello, everyone," he said, grinning that grin of his, and the apprehension in the bus melted away.

"Welcome to the Parchman express," Michael said, reaching over to clap him on the shoulder. "You ready for the chain gang, brother?"

"Breaking rocks is a great way for a boxer to stay in shape," Ivan

said. “I’ll look at it as a state-funded bodybuilding club.”

Sofie stared at him as they bumped along, not quite knowing what to say.

“What happened to your knee?” he asked, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and pressing at the bleeding abrasion.

“Officer Bill,” she replied.

His expression clouded at that. “Definitely good that I was on the Trailways then.”

Sofie wanted to reach out and touch him, but she was worried he would vanish if she did. He couldn’t really be there with her, could he?

“What about your match? I hope you didn’t come out of guilt.” She’d never been happier to see someone, but she didn’t want to be the impetus for his decision. A thought struck her, and she crossed her arms over her chest. “Or because you thought I couldn’t do this by myself.”

Ivan sighed and draped his hands over his legs. “I came because you were right. I wanted to help, and waiting until after I’d knocked some guy’s lights out wasn’t the way to do it. So I called Calvin and told him why I had to forfeit. Of course, he didn’t want to win like that, so we agreed to reschedule. We talked for a long time, actually—I wouldn’t be surprised if he was making the ride too.”

He took a deep breath. “And because I knew I would miss you too much,” he said in a low voice. He took her hand and kissed the back of it, a chaste motion, like something she read in her Arthurian legends. Now she knew why Guinevere had fallen.

He was looking at her with that intense gaze, the one that made Sofie feel both vulnerable and protected at once. She didn’t look away even as the wagon bumped along on the rutted country road. She’d made the journey down by herself, and she knew she could do it alone. But Ivan sitting beside her felt as right as the decision to come itself.

“Well, if I have to be thrown in the worst prison in the US, I’m glad it’s with you,” she said. The bus stopped and idled at the gates. Sofie knew that she and the other riders had a hard few weeks ahead of them, but her hand was in Ivan’s, and together they could do anything.

Chapter 13

Three weeks later

Sofie was too thin. Ivan ran his hand over her ribcage and the dip of her belly as she slept deeply beside him in the lumpy motel bed. They'd have to leave soon to continue the second leg of their journey home from Mississippi, but she needed her rest after the ordeal they'd been through. Being placed in separate cells with the other Freedom Riders had given them some level of safety, but many of the guards had tried to break them. Food had been scant and, when it arrived, nearly inedible. Mattresses and toothbrushes and privacy had been taken away as punishment for the songs they sang constantly to keep themselves motivated. As more and more young people from across the country joined the ride, the cells were filled to many times over their capacities, which was the only reason Ivan and Sofie had been released.

They'd been able to send each other notes through prison workers sympathetic to the Freedom Riders' plight, but he'd still missed her something terrible. Their reunion on the wagon, after he thought he'd lost her for good, had been too short. Having her warm and smooth beside him as he'd imagined for so long—it was more powerful than any rush of endorphins after a boxing match.

He loved her, even if it was too early to tell her that. She'd already skittered away when he'd jokingly dropped to one knee when they met outside the gates of Parchman, reminding him marriage was illegal where they were from, so he tucked that idea away for a time when she was ready, if she ever was. Ivan wasn't in any rush, despite the fact that he'd nearly spilled before he touched her the night before.

His member stiffened at the thought of their first time making love. They'd both known what awaited them as they wandered from the bus depot; even the disapproving look the man at the motel's front desk gave them had done nothing to dampen how much they wanted each other.

Nothing could stop that, it seemed.

The room they were in wasn't anywhere near good enough for Sofie, but it beat the amenities at Parchman. After weeks of crawling in his skin, the shower at the motel had seemed like a spa. When Sofie had emerged from the bathroom and laid her towel down on the bed, fear and determination and lust in her gaze, it'd seemed like whatever Christians must imagine heaven to be like.

Sofie stirred beneath his hand and turned sleepy brown eyes on

him, disturbing his recollection of the way she'd been so pliant beneath him just hours before. Ivan felt pinned by her gaze, like he'd been hit by a surprise blow.

"Did you know you laugh in your sleep?" he asked because he couldn't think of anything else to say. "It's kind of creepy. What were you dreaming about?"

Her eyes shimmered with mirth as she shook her head. "I don't remember. All I know is you were there, and that made everything all right."

Warmth rushed through Ivan, converging at a particular point in his chest

"Something's poking me," she said suddenly. Her voice was husky with sleep, but she was alert enough to reach down and embrace the hardening length of him in her fist. Pleasure marched up Ivan's spine as she smiled at him innocently while caressing him beneath the sheets. "There's a strange object in the bed with us. Maybe I should investigate."

"Ever intrepid Sofronia," he said, the S in her name coming out as a hiss because her touch felt so good.

He closed his fist around her hand as she stroked him, preventing her from making him blow too fast. When she released him, uncertain, he rolled over so that she was beneath him. He slid his arms beneath her back so that he cradled her, and settled between her legs, teasingly close to her warm entrance. "My, my, my. Little miss church girl sure has developed an appetite."

Sofie ran her hands over his back and up through his hair. "I'll have you know the most erotic thing I've ever read was at church. Song of Solomon," she said. The word *erotic* on her lips was enough to make his hips shift forward, seeking the pleasure of her warmth, but then she kept going. "First line: 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.'"

She stared at him expectantly, and he did as she commanded. His lips grazed hers, but she kissed him deeply, using her hands to pull his mouth down onto hers. He groaned into that kiss, and she licked at his lips, sliding her tongue in and taking what she wanted. That Sofie felt no need to be timid with him sent a shiver of pleasure through his body, one he felt in his toes.

He pulled his head back for a moment and caught her eye. "That's Old Testament, baby. Ketuvim. If you think I wasn't flipping to that section and having impure thoughts at the back of the synagogue, then you don't know me very well." She pressed her head back into the pillow and laughed, and Ivan had never seen anything more beautiful. He kissed her chin. "I have my own favorite line from the Songs."

Sofie put a hand over his mouth. “Wait! Let me guess.” She stared at him and then graced him with a wicked smile. “‘Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits.’”

Ivan licked at her palm, and she shivered as she pulled it away. “I guess you do know me,” he said.

“Not as well as I’d like to.” She reached between them and guided him inside of her. They both gasped, and Ivan took another harsh breath as her tightness squeezed along the length of his shaft. He bit his lip, hoping that the pain would distract from the pleasure that was threatening to send him over the edge much too soon.

“Oh!” He looked down into her face and was met with a look of surprised satisfaction.

“This feels better than last night, I imagine?” he asked as he thrust into her. He was glad his voice didn’t come out a strained squeak—just because he felt like a teenager with no control didn’t mean he had to sound like one.

She pressed her nails into his back and arched beneath him. “Yes, Ivan. Yes.”

“Good,” he growled. “Let’s get reacquainted, then.”

After that, there was no banter, no chitchat, just the overwhelmingly sweet pleasure of teaching a good girl some very naughty things.

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Ivan watched Sofie step out of Jack’s Brick House and hand a cookie to a little girl with round cheeks and two puffy pigtails, and something in him shifted yet again.

They’d returned home two days before, and had each been busy catching up with the life they’d left behind for a Mississippi jail. Now they were at Jack’s, not for training, but to celebrate history—a history he was now a part of. People were as convivial as they had been in prison, but instead of being crammed into a cell as they laughed and sang to pass the time, they were outside surrounded by blue sky, green grass, and the smell of meat on the grill. It was a shock to the system to go from mealy bread to tender sides of beef and juicy burgers. Ivan could barely eat, but he was happy to sit and observe.

He felt an overwhelming tenderness as Sofie interacted with Jack and his wife, the people who had been a secondary family to him. They weren’t so different, despite the way people on the stared as they walked hand in hand. And they’d be all right, in the long run. Their road wouldn’t be easy, but they weren’t the first to travel it. Besides, easy was for chumps.

Jack stood up from where he was talking to some of the younger boxers, the only people who hadn’t heard the story of how he beat Rocky Marciano in an exhausting sparring match but would never be
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credited. As the boys chatted excitedly after the climax of the tale, Jack dug around in an icebox for a soda and then chimed one of the ringside bells he'd brought outside for the occasion.

"Everyone, I just want to thank you for coming to this first annual Juneteenth Celebration at Jack's Brick House. I don't know why it took me so long to honor my grandfather in this way, but this year seems like a good year to start." He paused and took a sip of soda, and his mouth pulled into a grimace. Anyone who knew Jack understood that meant he was fighting deep emotion. Better to look mean than to look weak, he always said. "Sometimes it seems like the battle for freedom for our people is never-ending. It can make you bitter, when you think about the unfairness of it all. But right now, we're seeing a new generation taking up the mantle. I wish these youngins didn't have to, but I can't help but celebrate their determination, their focus, and their bravery."

He glanced at Sofie, who had walked over to stand beside Ivan.

"On this Juneteenth, I want to remember our people's liberation from slavery, but also to remind everyone of the continuing journey. I might not live to see it happen, but one day we will truly be free."

He scowled and took a sip of his soda as the guests began to clap. Ivan felt a lump in his throat as he looked at Jack's puff-tailed granddaughter skip up to console her Pop-Pop. If he and Sofie had a child, would he experience the same gut-wrenching fear that Jack must feel for all the young ones in his family?

"Sofie, the boy next to you says you can sing. Can you hum a little something for us?" Jack asked, trying to draw the attention away from himself. Ivan felt Sofie tense. He'd heard her voice across the yard at Parchman every now and again, but this was different. That night in the motel she'd told him how she hadn't sung since Miss Delia's death, and she still hadn't here in their hometown. But she looked up at him and asked, "Will you be my backup singer?"

He smiled at her and saw how her eyes brightened with emotion when he did. "Only if you'll be my ring-girl at the fight next month."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh please. I still have some sense of propriety, Ivan. Just not in the bedroom. Now follow my lead."

She turned to face the crowd and took a deep breath, and when she opened her mouth and belted out the first line, everyone else's mouths dropped open too. The dormouse had gone into hibernation, and Sofie let her voice unfurl full-bellied and proud, as if she wanted Miss Delia to hear, wherever she was.

"This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine." She glanced at him with a smile that made him want to kiss her, but she'd stomp his toes if he tried it. "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine."

Ivan joined her on the next line, knowing no one would be paying

attention to his voice anyway. It didn't matter.

This was Sofronia, and he'd follow her anywhere.

Epilogue

1964, Virginia

Sofie placed the to-do list on the freshly scrubbed laminate of the kitchen counter. Like everything else in the small room, it was a bright, buttery yellow; something straight from the 1955 edition of *House Beautiful* magazine. She'd hated it when she and Ivan first moved in, but it was actually nice to come home to something cheery when the neighbors all gave you the cold shoulder. She wondered if it was the afro she was growing out; when she'd viewed the apartment, her hair had been straightened with a hot comb—so that it was limp and lifeless, nonthreatening. People had only been mildly rude then, not openly hostile. Ivan joked that it was because he refused to do their taxes. They both knew the real reason.

She scanned the list, or rather the complex groupings of items, complete with headings, sublists, and footnotes. The orderly rows of fastidious handwriting made her feel in control, even when she was so nervous that she was sure she'd sweat through the pretty pink A-line dress she'd sewn specially for today. Under the heading HANNUKKAH, she'd written little notes that she could reference if she got too nervous: *Maccabee story; oil is important; mitzvah (find out from Ivan); berakot (blessings) – l'hadlik, she-asah nisim, shehekianu; do not blow out the shamash; ask Mr. Friedman to touch his horns.*

"Ivan!" she shouted in amused annoyance. He liked to make his own additions to her lists, especially when he knew her nerves were frayed.

He stepped out of their bedroom, still in the process of pulling his simple white t-shirt down over his muscular chest and abdomen. She caught a glimpse of smooth skin and a dark trail of hair, and then he tucked the shirt into his Levi's. His dark eyes homed in on her as he walked toward the kitchen. Maybe it was his bruised cheek, a remnant of his last match, that gave his approach a thrilling hint of danger. Or the way his full lips pulled up into the kind of smile that usually ended with her bent over the arm of the couch, the kitchen sink, or the dining room table. Everywhere but the bed, which good girls like her had been taught was the *only* place for such activities. She knew better now.

Now, Ivan walked up and gripped the counter on either side of her, hemming her in. The old Sofie would have been embarrassed at the way he made her blush like a sinner at a church revival. The new Sofie was still embarrassed, but leaned her hips forward, loving the contact with his muscular thighs.

“I’ve told you not to tamper with my lists,” she said, holding his gaze. His hands still gripped the counter, but now they slid along the metal trim, both of them reaching her hips simultaneously. His hands briefly cupped her curves as they moved upward, and then encircled her waist. The weight of them resting there was just as potent as a caress, maybe more so; it was a silent reminder of everything he could do to her.

Ivan grinned, heedless of the chipped front tooth that he was usually embarrassed to reveal; she found it so endearing her heart hurt. “And I’ve told you that if you intend to make me sit through a Hanukkah dinner with both of our fathers, I’m going to need something to look forward to besides malevolent stares from one side of the table and blatant disapproval from the other. I get enough of those as it is.”

His hands began to make small smoothing motions over her hips, as if he were fixing her dress or contemplating taking it off. She never knew with him.

He lifted one shoulder. “I figure you can ask my dad if he has horns under his yarmulke, I can ask your dad if he wants some watermelon, and they’ll both be so mad about those put-downs they’ll forget we’re living in sin. It’ll be a gas.”

She made an incredulous noise and pushed at his solid shoulder, which didn’t budge. “If you even breathe the word ‘watermelon’ in front of my father, he’ll stick that menorah where the sun don’t shine so fast it’ll still be lit. And I’ll help him.”

“Weren’t you the one who talked me into the whole nonviolence thing?” he asked, brows raised.

“Violence is never the answer,” Sofie replied solemnly. “Unless you sass my daddy. Then I’ll have to put a hurtin’ on you.”

He laughed. “Okay, then. I guess I’ll use my endurance training to withstand the family fun we’ll have to sit through tonight.” His smile faded as he ducked his head and looked into her eyes. He ran one callused knuckle over her jaw line. “Sof? What’s wrong?”

“I’m…I’m nervous.” She knew Ivan was too, which accounted for his joking, but this was important to her. She wanted Ivan’s father to like her. She wanted her father to accept Ivan. She wanted to have the fun family gatherings she remembered from her childhood, before her mother passed away, not an acrimonious night where everyone merely tolerated one another. Was that not in the cards for her, just because she’d fallen in love with a Jewish brawler instead of an Alpha Phi Alpha?

Ivan looked down at her, that crushing tenderness that was so at odds with everything else about him etched onto his face. “Listen to me. I’ve watched you stare down an officer with a rifle pointed in

your face. I've seen…" He paused, closed his eyes briefly. His Adam's apple bobbed. "I've seen you take a punch from a full-grown man that might have knocked me on my ass. You didn't cry, and you never flinched. You're the bravest woman I know. One holiday dinner with our fathers? Piece of cake, baby."

Sofie's eyes heated with tears. They'd been through so much in the last three years. But they'd been through it all together, which had made it tolerable. "You're going to mess up my makeup, you schmoe."

"See? You've got the Yiddish down already. Dad'll welcome you to the tribe with open arms." She leaned her forehead against his chest as she laughed. He smelled like Ivory soap and starch, even if he didn't act like a man who would. "As for your makeup; yeah, you're gonna have to reapply it."

"What?" When she looked up, his mouth was already on a collision course with hers. Their lips met and the same sweet explosion rocked her, the one that lit her up every time. She'd thought kissing the same man would get boring after months and years, but the press of Ivan's pouty lips and the slide of his tongue just did it for her. His fingers inched her dress up her thighs.

"This'll help with the nerves," he said as he pressed her into the counter and began kissing his way down her neck.

His mouth trailing kisses toward her breasts was far from calming, but she tugged his t-shirt out of his jeans and ran her hands over the warm swath of skin he had flashed earlier. "I'm willing to give anything a try," she said.

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Hours later, Sofie retreated to the kitchen in defeat. She opened the door of the Big Chill fridge and contemplated crawling inside.

Mr. Friedman was distant and overly formal, to the point that he seemed almost angry at her. When she explained that she'd had the menorah shipped from New York City by a friend she'd met during the protests, he hadn't reacted with delight, or even been impressed. Instead, he'd critiqued her placement of the candelabrum, saying it wasn't public enough, and had responded with a huff when she placed it in the front window, despite the risk to her curtains. When night fell, Ivan lit the shamash and invited his father to light the candle representing the first night of Hanukkah and to sing the shehekianu. Mr. Friedman had put him off. The shamash still burned alone, a flickering reminder that nothing she could do would please the man.

Her father was just as bad. There were good days and bad days with him, and this wasn't one of the good. He pretended not to comprehend the Jewish customs, as if taking the body of Christ at communion made much more sense. Every attempt at secular conversation Ivan threw out was rebuffed, or somehow came back
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around to how her mother was rolling in her grave knowing her Sofie was living in sin. He played deaf when Sofie reminded him that the law wouldn't allow them to marry, that miscegenation—the ugliness of the word made her shudder—wasn't legal in Virginia.

The two older men didn't speak to each other at all, as if Sofie's mother hadn't worked for Mr. Friedman all those years ago. As if there weren't so many important threads of their lives binding them together. Perhaps her father still resented the time he had lost with his wife to this family, and now he had to share his daughter with them, too.

She left the three men sitting in tense silence as she went to prepare the final part of the meal. She had been so looking forward to this particular aspect, experimenting with batch after batch while Ivan was at work until she had the recipe down pat. She remembered her mother doing the same thing when she started working for Mrs. Friedman, who had been a kind but exacting woman. If you couldn't make latkes to her specifications, you had to go.

As Sofie pulled the schmaltz out of the fridge, having hidden it behind the okra where Ivan would never venture, she thought of the standoff in the living room and felt like all her preparation would come to naught. But then she remembered all the times she had almost let despair win the day. If giving up was the way to go, the Civil Rights Act wouldn't have passed just that summer, beginning what was hopefully a brighter day for the children she and Ivan might one day have.

Sofie reached into the cabinet and pulled down the little plastic recipe box. Her name was inscribed on the label in fading black ink. The handwriting was so similar to her own that it still threw her off at first sight, until she remembered it belonged to the woman who was little more than a patchwork quilt of memories and emotions: her mother.

She pulled out the recipe and stared at it for a moment. That this was in her possession was, in a small way, responsible for Ivan coming into her life. She gave the creased index card a kiss for luck before reading the instructions she had already committed to memory. Her movements were automatic now: she lit the tabletop range, placed the cast iron skillet on the flames, and added a healthy coating of schmaltz to the pan. She began spooning in the mix of grated potatoes, onion, and egg a dollop at a time, spreading it out into flat discs.

If this didn't appease them, at least she could say she hadn't gone down without a fight.

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Things were no better when she bought out the platter of piping
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hot latkes. Ivan shot her a look of desperate relief when she came back into the room, and rushed to relieve her of the bowls of sour cream and applesauce she balanced precariously on each forearm.

"Happy Hanukkah," he said quietly as he took the bowls from her and dropped a kiss on her church. There was no sarcasm in his voice; he meant it.

They sat at the table, no one making eye contact. The dreidel lay unspun. The shamash flickered away at the center of the menorah, the lone candle on the rightmost side still unlit.

"Well, dig in!" she said in her bright hostess voice, even though she was tense enough that her jaw was starting to cramp. The men began stuffing their mouths, seemingly happy to have something to do to end the awkward silence.

Ivan made a sound of pleasurable surprise when he bit into his first latke. For a moment she thought she had made some miscalculation: too many onions or too little salt, or the schmaltz had gone bad. But when she glanced at him, he was regarding her with such adoration that it seemed too intimate for the dinner table. He didn't say anything, but his eyes were wide as he slowly chewed, savoring the taste.

"Sofie." Mr. Friedman cleared his throat. His eyes were glossy beneath his shaggy brows when he looked her full in the face for the first time that night. With his defenses down and his brow unlined, the similarity between him and his son was remarkable. "This tastes like…" He paused and pressed his lips together.

"Your mother's," her dad said quietly at the same time Mr. Friedman rasped out, "My wife's."

There was a silence around the table. Sofie dropped her hand into the space between her and Ivan's seats. His hand was waiting, as she knew it would be, and the sweet relief that coursed through her when his fingers slid between hers made her throat tight with emotion.

Mr. Friedman stood and walked toward the menorah. He lifted the shamash with trembling hands and began singing the first blessing in a soft but commanding voice as he lit the first candle of Hanukkah. "*Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam*…"

When Ivan's deep voice joined his father's, when her own father reached across the table for both of their hands and joined the blessing on the only word he could make out of the Hebrew—*Amein*—she finally understood what that term "mitzvah" meant. It was the kindness that allowed people to overcome all the differences society had erected as walls between them. It was a shared memory of love that could bridge what seemed to be an insurmountable gap. It was being surrounded by those that she cared about most, and knowing that, against all hardship, they were going to make it.

Author's Note

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed Sofie and Ivan's story—these two crazy kids have been bouncing around in my head for years and I'm happy that I was finally able to bring them out into the light. If you'd like to learn more about the Freedom Rides, I suggest the following resources:

- Etheridge, Eric, Roger Wilkins, and Diane McWhorter. 2008. *Breach of peace: portraits of the 1961 Mississippi freedom riders*. New York: Atlas & Co.
- Arsenault, Raymond. 2006. *Freedom riders: 1961 and the struggle for racial justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- American Experience: Freedom Riders. 2011. PBS. This documentary is available online at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/.

If you enjoyed this story and would like to read more of my multicultural historicals, check out *Agnes Moor's Wild Knight*, the story of a black woman and her Highlander in medieval Scotland, and *Be Not Afraid*, an African-American Revolutionary War romance in the anthology *For Love and Liberty*.

If you'd like to get updates about new releases and exclusive short stories, feel free to sign up for my newsletter!

Best,
Alyssa

About the Author

Alyssa Cole is a science editor, pop culture nerd, and romance junkie who recently moved to the Caribbean and occasionally returns to her fast-paced NYC life. When she's not busy writing, traveling, and learning French, she can be found watching anime with her real-life romance hero or tending to her herd of pets. Contact her on Twitter at @AlyssaColeLit or visit her website at www.AlyssaCole.com.